

The Joyful and the Woeful: A Study of Uncertainty in
Meister Eckhart, Derrida and Pinter

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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This study purports to examine an analogous affirmation of uncertainty in the vernacular writings of Meister Eckhart (1260-1328/9) and Derrida, in contrast to a negative depiction of uncertainty in the early plays of Harold Pinter.

In the **introductory** chapter, a preliminary review of all three figures' critical backgrounds takes place as I delineate the various interpretations which have been made of Eckhart, Derrida and Pinter.

The first real stage of the argument begins in **Chapter Two**. Section **one** examines the various similarities and differences between Derrida's *différance* and Eckhart's Godhead. After considering their respective contexts (that of thirteenth century scholasticism and French structuralism) and the essentially generative role of nothingness in both vocabularies, the section examines how Eckhart and Derrida call the notion of 'presence' into question for different reasons - 'God' can never be grasped because he is ineffably infinite, whereas the text can never be mastered because of an infinite oscillation between finite parameters of play.

Section **two** examines *The Homecoming* in precisely these terms, showing how critics have disagreed over the play in much the same way affirmative and negative theologians have disagreed over God - and ultimately proposing that the text of the play eludes all interpretations, positive and negative. This section also considers how uncertainty is negatively treated in the play - as a means of strategically dominating and humiliating other.

The first section of **Chapter Three** examines Eckhart and Derrida's positive treatment of errancy, how both writers see the destination as (respectively) spiritually deadening and illusory. This section examines how both writers advocate a centreless thought (Eckhart's pathless way) along with an analogous abandonment of motivations and justifications. It also considers the analogous difficulties which face both 'wandering thinkers', who profess to abandon the destination but at the same time still want to keep to one way rather than another.

Section **two** examines a correspondingly negative depiction of wandering in *The Caretaker*, delineating how Mick uses unmotivated and groundless behaviour to bully and deceive the homeless tramp of the play. In the second half of section two, a 'semiotic' reading of *The Caretaker* is proposed which equates 'wandering' with vulnerability, rather than any notion of liberation or spiritual freedom.

Chapter Four examines the association of certainty and representation with violence in Eckhart and Derrida. Although the early Derrida is seen as initially skeptical towards a possible non-violent relationship with the Other, an analogous 'openness' towards the mystery of God/the Other is finally perceived in both writers. Eckhart and Derrida, it is shown, see the uncertainty of God/the Other as something which must be preserved, not dispelled.

In contrast to this fundamentally positive understanding of the uncertainty of otherness in Eckhart and Derrida, **section two** undertakes an examination of the Other in Pinter as radically evil. Through a neoplatonic reading of this section examines how Pinter's darker version of the Absurd employs the theological language of ineffability and unfathomable motives to more sinister effect. Groundless love becomes groundless malice.

Chapter Five ends with the uncertainty of the secret. Derrida's long-abiding objection that Meister Eckhart - and negative theology in general - is the logocentric keeper of a secret, is finally dealt with. Each of the points Derrida raises against Eckhart are systematically dealt with. This section attempts to show how the version of Eckhart Derrida deconstructs is undermined by the existence of *another*, more unorthodox Eckhart whose deconstructive implications Derrida has simply not allowed for.

The **second** section examines briefly whether Pinter, like Derrida's Eckhart, is the keeper of a secret - and what role secrets play in *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. It also considers the possibility that there are secrets in Pinter which ultimately have no meaning.

In the **conclusion**, I summarise my findings and re-iterate my final point: that the dangers and menace of Pinter's drama remains a sobering corrective to Eckhart and Derrida's joyful affirmation of the uncertain.

Acknowledgments.

Some revised and re-edited parts of this thesis have already appeared in print - certain elements of Chapter 3, section 1, have appeared in "Tlön, Pilgrimages and Postmodern Banality" *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* April 1998 (Liverpool University Press). An early draft of Chapter 2, section 1 has appeared as "Negative Theology, Derrida and the Critique of Presence: A Poststructuralist Reading of Meister Eckhart" in *The Heythrop Journal* 40:2 (1999)

I declare that this thesis is wholly my own work .

Ian Almond, September 18th , 1998

A Note on Translations.

In dealing with Eckhart and Derrida's primary sources, all page numbers from the original French and German have been quoted in **bold** (e.g. *Of Grammatology* 14, **20**).

The main source texts used for Meister Eckhart's vernacular sermons have been Josef Quint's five volume *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart and Frankfurt: Kohlhammer, 1936ff) and also Nikolaus Largier's *Meister Eckhart : Werke* (basically a shorter, compact , two-volume version of Quint's selection [Frankfurt am Main: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1993).

With translations I have been much more flexible, making use of several available editions (Clark, Davies, Schürmann and Walshe - see bibliography) and occasionally modifying the translated passage myself.

Three of Derrida's translated pieces ("Post-Scriptum", "Of A Newly Adopted Apocalyptic Tone" and "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials") have all appeared in Harold Coward's *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) and it is this edition I have made use of.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1. Introduction

Certainty is the region of death, uncertainty the valley of life.

- Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Yuke*¹

To sum up, briefly, the essential aim of this thesis: the study of an analogous affirmation of uncertainty in Meister Eckhart and Derrida, in contrast to a profoundly negative portrayal of uncertainty in the early works of Harold Pinter. The study of two attitudes: one which extols uncertainty in all its forms (namelessness, unpredictability, whylessness, waylessness, secrecy) as essentially life-giving and positive, in contrast to a view which sees uncertainty in a more menacing, sinister context. The namelessness of both Eckhart's God of love and Derrida's endlessly proliferating *différance* is also the namelessness of Goldberg and McCann's mysterious, violent organisation. The 'pathless way' Meister Eckhart exhorts us to embark upon and the joyous errancy of the Derridean text is also the anguished homelessness of Pinter's caretaker. The unknowability of the Eckhartian Godhead beyond God and the uncontrollability of Derrida's text, an epistemological uncertainty celebrated rather than resented, provides in *The Homecoming* nothing more than a basis for endless mind games and ruthless power-struggles.

A secondary aim of this thesis will be to examine and compare not simply the attitudes towards uncertainty in all three writers, but also the type of uncertainty they deal with. Both Meister Eckhart and Derrida consider God/the text to be resistant to all totalization, but certainly not for the same reasons. The divine ineffability of Eckhart's God is not to be simplistically equated with the semantic instability of Derrida's text, for reasons which are examined in Chapter One. I also hope to show how these two types of uncertainty - one concerning infinite hermeneutical possibility, the other infinite *undecidability* between a *finite* number of alternatives - both make themselves manifest in Pinter's plays. My contention is that whereas Pinter's early plays (*The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*) with their emphasis on a nameless, mysterious organisation, make use of a more theological uncertainty

¹ cit. in Mark C. Taylor's *ErRing: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986) p176

(uncertainty as an infinitely speculative secret), later plays such as *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming* make use of a more terrestrial, undecidable version of uncertainty - a “determinate oscillation between possibilities” as Derrida says in *Limited Inc.*² In the early plays, we ask: “Who do Goldberg and McCann work for? Why do they want Stanley?” In *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, the questions become: “Is Ruth a tart or a tease? Is Aston’s smile genuine or malicious?”

In a sense, this could also be seen as a study of the uncertain in negative theology, deconstruction and the British theatre of the Absurd, even though there will be a reluctance to use such terms in this thesis. Like most generic labels, words such as ‘absurd’, ‘deconstructive’ and ‘negative theology’ take on a semantic life of their own as soon as they appear on a page, pulling the assertions they accompany in unwanted directions. If I have chosen to keep with the subjects’ proper names, it is partly out of a desire for accuracy, and partly out of a conviction that St Thomas does not provide us with the only way of understanding negative theology, anymore than Jonathan Culler gave us the last word on Derrida, or Esslin the definitive Pinter. Something residual in all three writers necessarily exceeds these largely institutional appropriations of their work.

This thesis must demonstrate, therefore, that Meister Eckhart was to St Thomas and medieval Scholasticism, what Derrida is to German phenomenology and French structuralism. By re-emphasising how “no-one can really say what God is”³ in the face of Thomist scholasticism, Eckhart re-located uncertainty in the heart of the Scholastic project - just as, by re-emphasising the uncontrollable play within the text (even texts written by structuralists), Derrida re-introduced a disruptive uncertainty into the foundations of both structuralism and phenomenology. This possibility that the Christian tradition contained (and contains) within itself the potential to deconstruct and liberate itself from a reifying onto-theology has been advocated by a number of figures⁴, not least of all Derrida himself:

² *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1988) p146

³ James M. Clark, *Meister Eckhart* (London: Nelson & Sons, 1957) p158 - taken from the sermon *Homo quidam fecit*

⁴ Kevin Hart insists that “Eckhart’s definition of God deconstructs Aquinas’ definition.” (*Trespass of the Sign* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989] p257). John D. Caputo also writes of Eckhart’s “powerful deconstructive effort...to undo the ontotheological God” (*The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* [New York: Fordham University Press, 1978] pxvi). Most recently, Thomas A. Carlson has compared Derrida and Maurice Blanchot to Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart in

...the point would seem to be to liberate theology from what has been grafted onto it, to free it from its metaphysical super-ego...And thus, from the perspective of faith, deconstruction can at least be a very useful technique when Aristotelianism or Thomism are to be criticised...⁵

Which does not mean, of course, that Derrida excludes Meister Eckhart from his critique of metaphysics, or feels that 'negative theology' is synonymous with 'deconstruction' - as we shall see in Chapter Five.

Umberto Eco, in the closing pages of his doctoral dissertation of Aquinas' aesthetics, was probably one of the first to see some affinity between Structuralism and Scholasticism: "Structuralism can find not a little of its ancestry in the Scholastic *forma mentis*".⁶ Although hesitant in painting St Thomas as an "early kind of Structuralist" (217), Eco does highlight the similarities between the two systematizing approaches: the claim to be "an interdisciplinary discourse", the proposal of a "universal logic", the claim to reduce all the human sciences to "a single master science" (in Saussure's case, linguistics), an analogous interest in "binary divisions" and a method of thinking "synchronically" (217). Both Eckhart and Derrida, in their own respective ways, defeat these attempts as a system by re-introducing a radical uncertainty into the subjects of the scholastic/structuralist project. By re-emphasizing God as unknowably divine and the text as an unmasterable cluster of forces, they deconstruct the "will to a system" (to use Nietzsche's phrase) they found themselves opposed to.⁷

their language concerning "an impossible death and an unknowable divine" (see *Christianity and Literature* 47:2 [1998] p169).

⁵ Derrida is speaking in the interview "Derrida in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in *Critical Exchange* 17 (1985) p12 - cit. in Kevin Hart's essay "Jacques Derrida : The God Effect" from Philip Blond (ed) *Post-Secular Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1998) p262

⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (trans. Hugh Bredin, London: Radius, 1988) p216

⁷ Nietzsche writes in *Twilight of the Idols*: "I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity." (trans. A. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995) p36. One of the deliberate, unforgivable flaws of this thesis will be to intentionally ignore more recent, complex readings of Aquinas and use him as a kind of 'straw man' for medieval scholasticism in general. The word 'Thomist' will therefore be employed in a very narrow sense, as one who sees negative theology merely as a corrective of positive theology. Although Wolfson presented an Aquinas who still interpreted "certain divine attributes eminentially" (Harry A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Religion* [Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977] vol 2 p523) and as "analogies" (p524), this orthodox understanding of St Thomas the Systematizer has been eroded by a number of critics - starting with Josef Pieper (*The Silence of St Thomas*, 1957) and Sertillanges, who not only stresses the apophatic in Aquinas' writings, but goes so far as to suggest the agnostic. David Burrell has done a great deal to dispel the image of St Thomas the Scholastic, painting an Aquinas who "retreat(s) into the chaste mysticism of silence" (David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973] p135), an Aquinas who whether one can know anything about God at all. For Burrell, Aquinas invokes the *res/modus* distinction ('x in God is

In a very different fashion, Pinter re-introduced a new sense of uncertainty into British drama just when the Fifties' wave of British realism was beginning to gather momentum. Pinter's speech took on the gritty, working-class idiom of Osborne's Jimmy Porter and Wesker's Beatie whilst simultaneously calling that language into question. The result was an uncompromising, 'kitchen-sink' naturalism filled with bizarre occurrences and strange silences - a new kind of play which had all the trappings of a work by Osborne or Simpson but none of the content. If *Look Back in Anger* or *A Taste of Honey* had shocked audiences, Pinter's early work disconcerted them. People who had been scandalised by the angry young diatribes of Kenneth Haigh's Jimmy Porter were at least *certain* of what they had been shocked by. The first reactions to *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* - confusion, hilarity, uncomprehending anger - reflected the profound sense of uncertainty which Pinter had injected into British drama. An uncertainty which, for all the laughter at the Hammersmith, nurtured a darker, more disturbing element beneath it.

This thesis, therefore, proposes to examine these two attitudes towards uncertainty - the joyful and the woeful - and the kinds of uncertainty which provoke them. The first half of Chapter Two will examine the critique of presence exemplified by both Eckhart's Godhead and Derrida's *différance*, and examine the analogous descriptions which both writers provide about them. In the second half, the text of *The Homecoming* is used to show how Pinter critics have argued over the play in much the same way 'affirmative' and 'negative' critics have discussed the knowability of God (Esslin and Wardle insisting everything the characters say is true, Almansi and Henderson indignant that everything they say is a lie) - and how the contradictions and ambiguities in Pinter's play ultimately render the text elusive to *all* unproblematic interpretations, negative and positive. I also examine the various attitudes of the characters towards uncertainty *within* the play itself, to show how there are two kinds of character-type in Pinter: those who flee uncertainty, and those who ruthlessly exploit it.

unimaginably x')and yet "his practice contradicts it" (139). Burrell finds passages in Aquinas where the apophatic seems to gain the upper hand - such as this moment in the commentary on Boethius: "...when we come to the end of our knowledge, we acknowledge God as the unknown, because the mind has made the most progress when it realizes that God lies beyond anything that it can comprehend." (Burrell, 142 - cit. from *In Libro Boethii de Trinitatis expositio* , Book 1:2, ad 1)

Chapter Three considers uncertainty through the motif of 'wandering'. It examines how both Eckhart and Derrida advocate actions 'without why', an analogous distrust of motivations and destinations which is found in both writers. The loss of centre - which for Eckhart translates as the abandonment of the concept of God - is seen as a liberating gesture, not a lamenting one. Such a positive, life-affirming view of wandering and aimlessness is presented in stark contrast to the anguished tramp in *The Caretaker*, whose vagrancy never means anything other than vulnerability. Through a 'semiotic' reading of *The Caretaker*, seeing Davies as the wandering text, we see how the very absence of textual origins - seen by Derrida as leading to joyous errancy - only ever results for Davies in desperation and terror, as he is ruthlessly interpreted and re-interpreted by those around him. To wander is not always an expression of freedom.

Chapter Four considers the possibility of 'certainty' as violence. It examines the attitude towards names, violence and the Mystery of the Other in all three writers. Beginning with a common understanding of eponymy as violent in Eckhart and Derrida, Chapter Four locates in both writers an analogous openness towards the Other, an openness which consists in a refusal to name, conceptualise or anticipate the Other in anyway at all, a simple acknowledgement of the Other's radical incommensurability. This positive, affirming version of the Other is contrasted with the darker version found in *The Birthday Party*. Pinter's play about a man who is gradually subjugated, crushed and absorbed into a mysterious organization is compared with the Neoplatonic assimilation of the Eckhartian soul as it progresses through the various stages of its journey towards silent union with the ineffable One. The ineffability of Goldberg and McCann's mystery, however, is not loving but malicious, a nameless entity which seeks through its agents to inflict harm upon others, inexplicably and unconditionally. In this sense, I try to show how Pinter - like Kafka and Ionesco - represents a darker strain of the tradition of the Absurd, one which constitutes a sinister re-working of the various vocabularies of negative theology and Neoplatonism.

In the final chapter, which examines uncertainty understood as 'secrecy', Derrida's long-abiding position on Meister Eckhart and negative theology in general is finally considered. Derrida's insistence on Eckhart as ultimately being, for all his deconstructive characteristics, the keeper of a secret, is met with an objection: that

Derrida's interpretation of Eckhart as ultimately returning God to onto-theology, although relatively valid, fails to take into account the wilder, less orthodox moments of an *other* Eckhart, one who cannot simply be re-inscribed within a scholastic, onto-theological tradition. In the second section of Chapter Five, I examine whether Pinter, like Eckhart, is the keeper of a secret. I also consider the role of the secret in *The Dumb Waiter*, and suggest that what secrets there are in Pinter's plays are almost always malicious - hidden desires to kill, maim or humiliate. The secret, which in Eckhart's sermons is usually the secret of God's holy Word, bringing love and spiritual renewal, only brings death to Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*.

Before beginning with the real kern of the argument in Chapter Two, we shall briefly review the critical background to all three writers. It is a review of all the various Eckharts, Derridas and Pinters which have influenced this study, a review which cannot claim to be comprehensive, but which does give an idea of the extraordinary possibilities which any of the studied texts allows for.

1.1 Which Eckhart?

Inevitably, any brief survey of Eckhart criticism cannot hope to address the startling diversity of readings which the Dominican master has provoked. The most this section can do is to provide a general outline of the critical background, dwelling for a moment on some of the more significant studies of relevance to this thesis, whilst at the same time mentioning some of the more ideologically-motivated appropriations of Eckhart's work which have been made over the years. For a more detailed and chronological account of the development of Eckhart criticism, see Chapter 1 of Oliver Davies' 1991 work, beginning with Franz von Baader - allegedly the father of modern Eckhart studies - and also Giorgio Penzo's 1997 study *Invito al Pensiero di Eckhart*, which places particular emphasis on Nicholas of Cusa's role in the re-discovery of Eckhart's works (pp83-109).⁸ Probably the most comprehensive and illuminating study of Eckhart's reception in German thought remains

⁸ Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991); Giorgio Penzo, *Invito al Pensiero di Eckhart* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997).

Degenhardt's 1967 work *Studien Zum Wandel des Eckhartbildes*, with particularly strong chapters on Schopenhauer and the Nazification of Eckhart.⁹

Regarding the impossibility of arriving at a single, exclusive interpretation of Eckhart, Etienne Gilson has perhaps best summed up the hermeneutical dilemmas facing any would-be interpreter of the Meister:

The difficult lies not in finding a good interpretation of Meister Eckhart, but rather in making a choice between so many coherent interpretations, founded on irreproachable texts [*sur des textes irrécusables*] and yet different between them sometimes to the point of complete contradiction...the problem is that after having constructed one interpretation, one realises one could have elaborated another, completely different and yet based on texts no less authentic than the preceding one [*non moins authentiques que la précédente* - own trans.]¹⁰

Any perusal of even the most nominal Eckhart bibliography will confirm this - Catholic Eckharts, Protestant Eckharts, Nazi Eckharts, Marxist Eckharts, Zen/Hindu/Mahayana Eckharts, heretical Eckharts, muddled/mediocre Eckharts, Eckharts who had nothing to do with the Protestant Reformation and Eckharts who were single-handedly responsible for it. Although a diverse critical reception is a common fate for practically every widely-read thinker, Eckhart's own critical legacy has attracted an unusually diverse following (from Nazi intellectuals such as Alfred Rosenberg to Zen scholars such as D.T.Suzuki) for a number of reasons: the absence of any definitive edition of Eckhart's sermons and treatises until at least 1936 (Pfeiffer's 1857 edition, although of undeniable importance, also contained a great deal of wrongly-attributed material); the alleged differences between the Latin and the German works, differences which for some (Koch, for example¹¹) are merely a question of tone, whilst for others distinguish (as McGinn puts it) the "vibrant and creative vernacular preacher" from the "dry and uninteresting scholastic writer"¹²; the marginality of Eckhart as posthumously-convicted heretic, which has drawn from sympathetic parties a number of 'anti-clerical' or overtly 'unorthodox'

⁹ Ingeborg Degenhardt, *Studien zum Wandel des Eckhartbildes* (Leiden, 1967)

¹⁰ taken from Gilson's preface to Vladimir Lossky's *Théologie Négative chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris, 1973) p9

¹¹ In Koch's oft-cited essay "Zur Analogielehre Meister Eckharts" (Kurt Ruh (ed), *Altdeutsche und Altniederländische Mystik* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964]) insists upon the "closed unity" of Eckhart's thought, as opposed to an "unclear syncretism, whose heterogeneous elements are violently and inorganically combined [*gewaltsam und unorganisch verbindet*]" p277

¹² Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986) vol 2, p1 - not McGinn's viewpoint. Alois Haas talks of the "distancing objectification" of the language of the Latin works, in contrast to the German works' "directness of engaged and intentional language"(taken from "Schools of Late Medieval Mysticism" in Bernard McGinn(ed), *Christian Spirituality* [London: Routledge & Kegan, 1987] p147).

interpretations; and finally, Eckhart's own highly original language and striking use of imagery, an adventurous style which for many critics has resulted in a number of straightforward contradictions.¹³

The existence of such a wide diversity of readings does prompt an impulse towards the other extreme - namely, an instinctive closure towards any 'contemporary' interpretation and an insistence that Eckhart can *only* be understood within his own immediate context. C.F.Kelley's 1977 study, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, is one such example. After boldly stating how his book "supersedes all former interpretations of Eckhart's teaching" (partly as a result of "an ignorance of Eckhart's Latin writings" and partly by too many scholars being "limited by an education in modern philosophy"¹⁴) Kelley goes on to extol an Eckhart "wholly traditional in the truest sense" (xiv). The perfectly valid desire to ground one's reading of Eckhart in his original tradition becomes, for Kelley, the desire to *return* Eckhart to such a tradition, safe from the clutches of "modern philosophy" (a phrase used repeatedly throughout the book). A much more moderate and reasoned plea for context comes from Turner's excellent book *The Darkness of God* (1995):

What is the contemporary reader going to make of Eckhart's radical doctrines of detachment and of the nothingness of the self if they are ripped up from their roots in Neoplatonic apophaticism, except some 'mere' metaphors, no doubt satisfyingly redolent of Buddhism?¹⁵

Which all rather depends on whether one feels a proliferation of interpretations to be a good thing or a bad one. Although there is much truth in Turner's remark, two points need to be made: first of all, there is nothing "contemporary" about Eastern readings of Eckhart - Schopenhauer was equating the Meister with Buddha as early as 1859¹⁶, and Rudolf Otto's comparative study of Eckhart and Sankara (*West-Östliche Mystik*) dates back to 1926. Secondly, the notion that one should forever read a text in the light of its original context (in this case, forever

¹³ Oliver Davies sums this up best: "[Eckhart] tells us that our union with God is not love but knowledge (Sermon W 72), not knowledge but love (Sermon W 77). Speaking also of the birth of God in the soul, he tells us that it is both intellect (Sermon 23) and not intellect (Sermon W 72), that it is to be identified with grace in one sermon (Sermon W 68) and not in another (Sermon W 41)." In Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, (London: Penguin, 1994) pxxxiv

¹⁴ C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) pxii-xiii

¹⁵ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) pp266-7

¹⁶ See Ingeborg Degenhardt, *Studien zum Wandel des Eckhartbildes* (Leiden: Brill, 1967) p158

read Eckhart in the light of Proclus and Dionysius) would surely be alien to the medieval mind, and certainly to Eckhart's own occasionally wild hermeneutics - consider his highly original interpretations of "Mary and Martha" and the "Casting out of the Money Lenders".¹⁷

If Kelley's insistence on a "wholly traditional" Eckhart appears simplistic, this is partly due to the debate over what kind of 'traditional' context Eckhart should be considered in - as a straightforward Scholastic in the Thomist tradition (Otto Karrer, Denifle, et al) or through the influence of Maimonides, Proclus and Dionysius as a thinker with a much more Neoplatonic frame of mind (Lossky, Schürmann, Turner). Davies is convinced that Eckhart "needs fundamentally to be considered within the context of the German Dominican school which fashioned him".¹⁸ Which would mean understanding Eckhart in the light of such writers as Dietrich von Freiburg and, of course, Albert the Great. The German Dominicans' unusually Augustinian emphasis on self-knowledge (on the divine intellect within us) would play down the Thomist, and ultimately Aristotelian elements in Eckhart, a move few neo-Thomist scholars would agree with.

Given the internal strife in Eckhart scholarship over a number of issues - the question of Eckhart's (un)orthodoxy, the historical circumstances surrounding his trial, his exact relationship to the Thomist tradition, the (dis)parity between his Latin and German works, the alleged incompatibility between his two metaphors of the birth of the Son in the ground of the soul and the breakthrough (*Durchbruch*) to the Godhead, not to mention the precise extent of God's ineffability in Eckhart - it comes as no surprise that less theologically-orientated readings encounter a similar range of diversity. Although lying in diametrically opposite directions, politically-motivated appropriations of Eckhart by both Marxist (Bloch, Ley) and Nazi critics (Rosenberg) do share one thing in common: a de-transcendentalising of Eckhartian motifs, a perceived desire to emphasize the divine in man at the expense of the divine in God as a liberating gesture. In Ernst Bloch, Eckhart's insistence on the unity of God and the soul becomes a subversive, emancipatory gesture which ultimately sees "the treasure in Heaven

¹⁷ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p155

¹⁸ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p92

[as] the property of man" (*die Schätze im Himmel als Eigentum der Mensch*).¹⁹ Thus for Bloch, Eckhart supplies not just an "aspiring subject" but also a "blown-open, descending heavenly kingdom" (*gesprengter, niedersteigender Himmel*).²⁰

In the middle of his work *Der Mythos des XX. Jahrhunderts* (1930)²¹, Alfred Rosenberg dedicated the central chapters to Meister Eckhart, a figure he saw as the Nordic apostle of a new, Germanic Christianity, one which would "overcome Syrian dogma and awake the God in our own breast" (219). Although Rosenberg's reading shares with both Bloch and Ley an Eckhart set against institutionalised religion and an emphasis on the divinity in man, Rosenberg's scholarship is distinctly inferior. Painting Eckhart as the last champion of manly, Aryan values in an otherwise Semitic Christian faith, Rosenberg laments the petering out of the Meister's vigorous sense of the divine into the effeminate sentimentality of Angelus Silesius. It is a reading in many ways reminiscent of Bäumler's Nietzsche, wishful to the point of absurdity. Using Büttner's edition of the sermons, Rosenberg manages to invent an Eckhart where "race and self, blood and soul lie in close connection with one another" (*Rasse und Ich, Blut und Seele stehen im engen Zusammenhang*, 258), an Eckhart whose message is not for those of mixed race, but rather for those "of the same or related blood" (*des gleichen oder verwandten Blutes*, 258).

The profusion of Eastern readings of Eckhart (Otto, Schomerus, Suzuki, Ueda) do seem to reflect a tremendous desire to see Eckhart as some form of proto-Buddhist in the West. Whether this proposition is viable is another question, although such 'eastern' perspectives have opened up the critical debate in an interesting way (*pace* Turner). Rudolf Otto's *Mysticism East and West* (first published in English in 1932) constitutes one of the first major confrontations of Eckhart with an eastern thinker - in Otto's case, the ninth century Indian sage Sankara. Otto sees "an almost identical metaphysic"²² in the two figures, linking the Sanskrit terms 'maya' and 'adavaita' with Eckhartian 'multiplicity' and 'non-

¹⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum* - found in his *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968) vol 14 p95

²⁰ *ibid*, p287

²¹ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1930)

²² Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism: East and West*, trans. Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne (London: Collier Books, 1932) p4

duality'.²³ Probably one of the clearest (and fairest) considerations of the 'eastern' Eckhart by an Eckhart scholar can be found in the final pages of Schürmann's 1978 work²⁴; Schürmann lists eight alleged similarities between Zen Buddhism and Eckhart's thought, proposed by Suzuki in his *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, and then goes on to evaluate the validity of each one. Amongst others, Suzuki associates Eckhartian *istichheit* with Buddhist *tathata* or 'is-ness', *gelâzenheit* with 'emptiness' or *sunyata*, Lao-Tzu's Tao with Eckhart's Godhead and the divine spark in the soul with Zen *satori*. Despite Suzuki's confident claim that Eckhart's thought is "singularly Mahayanistic"²⁵, somewhat cautiously Schürmann concedes a substantial resemblance only on the last point.

Another genre of Eckhart-interpretations which might be said to have developed over the past fifty years could be called 'Heideggerian' readings of Eckhart. Käte Oltmanns' 1935 study attempts to read Eckhart in the light of *Being and Time*. Oltmanns, herself a student on Heidegger's 1919 lecture course on medieval mysticism, presents Eckhart's "dialectical relationship" of the soul to God. God is understood as "freedom", a freedom which the soul simultaneously must be and cannot be, which has rather bleak consequences for the unhappy *Dasein* which seeks to escape the facticity of its thrownness - Eckhart "wishes only to show us that we have to love Being as it is".²⁶ Two later studies of Heidegger and Eckhart (Schürmann, 1972, and Caputo, 1978) choose rather to emphasise the resemblance between the *later* Heidegger and Eckhart. Schürmann sees the Eckhartian soul as the ground/clearing where "the One conflicts with the multiple"²⁷, a "three-fold play of God, man and the world" (114) which prefigures the four-fold Heideggerian *Geviert*. Hence, he sees the Eckhartian openness to God in the same light as Heidegger's "openness towards the favours of the Mystery", the new ground where we can glimpse the concealing-unconcealing nature of Being.

John D. Caputo, at least in his 1978 work *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, follows a similar line, seeing the ground of the soul as a "clearing" where

²³ *ibid*, p4

²⁴ Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) pp221-6

²⁵ *cit.* in Schürmann, 222

²⁶ Oltmanns, p123, *cit.* in Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, p196

²⁷ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p107

God may “take place”.²⁸ For Caputo, the common ground between Heidegger and Eckhart lies in “a distrust of the Idols of metaphysics and their openness to the Mystery”(xxiii). Significantly, Caputo also sees in Eckhart “a powerful deconstructive effort...to undo the onto-theological God” (xvi), although it is only in his later book *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) that he talks about Eckhart in relation to contemporary hermeneutics as “one of the great masters of disruption”²⁹, a description which places his Eckhart very close to the reading of the *Meister* presented in this thesis. Caputo is also one of the few people to have written exclusively about Derrida and Meister Eckhart. In “Mysticism and Transgression” (1989) he admits that Eckhart was ultimately ‘logocentric’, but cites Eckhart’s prayer “I pray God to rid me of God” as a “prayer against closure”.³⁰ He also draws attention to a common predilection in both thinkers for playing with words - noting how throughout his sermons, Eckhart puns on *ave* (as in ‘ave Maria’) and *ane we* (‘pathless’), *adeler* (‘eagle’) and *edeler* (‘nobleman’). The extent to which Meister Eckhart’s thought is logocentric - and thereby still belongs to a metaphysics of presence - shall be examined in the final chapter.

1.2 Which Derrida?

If one were naive enough to ask for some empirical ‘proof’ of the disseminative possibilities of texts, the reception of Derrida’s own works would be sufficient to show how no author can ever control the responses of their readers. Like Eckhart, the versions of Derrida which have appeared since his introduction to the English-speaking world are disconcertingly at odds with one another: De Man’s story-teller, Norris’ rigorous thinker, Altizer’s Kabbalist, Gasché’s System-builder, Rorty’s playful exposé of hidden *logoi*, Habermas’ mystic...Derrida’s texts have undergone a somewhat ironic dissemination of their own, one which seems to show no signs of ending.

²⁸ John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978) p107

²⁹ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p4

³⁰ John D. Caputo, “Mysticism and Transgression: Meister Eckhart and Derrida” in Hugh J. Silverman (ed), *Derrida and Deconstruction* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1989) p33

Critical disagreement with Derrida, apart from often failing to distinguish his work from a much more generic understanding of 'deconstruction', manifests itself in two ways: firstly, in a basic disagreement with what Derrida is 'perceived' to be saying (that 'no context can absolutely determine a meaning', that 'there is nothing outside the text', that 'all interpretations are misinterpretations'); secondly, in a conviction that Derrida's writings either advocate or unwittingly result in an intellectual/moral irresponsibility. Although the second objection often follows on from the first, there are critics who, whilst sympathetic to the general drift of Derrida's thought, nevertheless retain a certain unease towards the moral and political ambivalence of deconstruction.³¹ The problematic biographies of Heidegger and de Man, in this respect, have not helped the status of deconstruction.

Although objections to Derrida vary in tone and motive, most do seem to involve a charge of 'mystification' or 'incoherence'. Habermas, in a reading based more on Culler than Derrida³², sees a theorist who "promotes a mystification of palpable sociable pathologies" (181), who remains "close to Jewish mysticism" (182) and who ultimately represents the "mysticism of the New Paganism" (184). Although Habermas' refusal to see Derrida in any other context than that of Heidegger³³ facilitates this charge of 'mysticism', Habermas is actually indebted to Susan Handelman for her earlier placement of Derrida in the Jewish tradition of rabbinical hermeneutics. It is precisely this perceived belief of Derrida in the "absolute

³¹ For an excellent review of this scene, see Michael Fischer's "Deconstruction and the Redemption of Difference" (in Wendell Harris(ed), *Beyond Poststructuralism: The Speculations of Theory and The Experience of Reading* [Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 1996] pp259-277). Fischer, who feels the political activists' "dismissal of deconstruction has been too sweeping" (259), maintains deconstruction can still supply "a much needed perspective on [social] action" (275), even though with apolitical critics it can "license indecisiveness" (274). For a passionately (and amusingly) Marxist response to the perceived irresponsibility/impotency of Derrida's thought, see Terry Eagleton's famous "Marxism and Deconstruction" (*Contemporary Literature* [Fall 1981] 477-488). Eagleton, although willing to admit that "Derrida's dismantling might be richly resourceful" (486), ultimately sees its use as discouraging any notion of political critique ("What could be less deconstructed than the facts?" 486). Deconstruction, by proposing "a problematic which tends to see meaning itself as terroristic" (480), derails all useful political theory by robbing it of its truth claim. In a world without facts, Eagleton argues, how will anyone protest about anything?

³² Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Boston: MIT Press 1987). In the footnotes of *Limited Inc*, Derrida accuses Habermas of not having read a single word of his texts, and of having used instead Johnathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*. See Jeffrey Nealon's "The Discipline of Deconstruction" in *PMLA* 107 (1992) p1275-6

³³ Habermas calls Derrida at various points an "authentic disciple" of Heidegger (161), an "orthodox Heideggerian" (165) and arrives at the conclusion that "Derrida's attempt to go beyond Heidegger does not escape at aporetic structure of a truth-occurrence eviscerated of all truth-as-validity" (167)

readability of the text”(166) which angers Habermas, who sees in it the kern of Derrida’s levelling of the distinction between philosophical and literary texts.

Anglo-American objections to Derrida’s works (from figures such as Abrams, Ellis and Searle) invoke a similar vocabulary of ‘common sense’ in their opposition to what they feel to be Derrida’s ‘nonsense’. John Searle, in a debate which has been ongoing with Derrida for almost twenty years, paints a Derrida who is “ignorant of the history of the philosophy of language” (one wonders whether Wittgenstein, who claimed to read so little philosophy, would have agreed with the spirit of this rebuttal). Searle insists that “any use of any concept is always relative to a Background [a context]”, and this “renders a certain context-free account of meaning and intentionality impossible”.³⁴ Searle invokes his theories of the “Background” and the “Network” to refute Derrida’s proposal that no context can ever absolutely determine a meaning, ironically castigating Derrida for not reading Austin in the context of Wittgenstein (and thereby insisting that Derrida participates in the discussion on *his* terms, not Derrida’s). John Ellis’ wonderfully readable book *Against Deconstruction* (1989) also fails to enter into any genuine spirit of dialogue with Derrida, whom he accuses of ‘mysticism’ (8), self-contradiction (13), of a complete incomprehension of Saussure (22) and, ultimately, of a “contribution to the debate on language and meaning” which is neither “substantial”, “coherent” nor “revolutionary” (66).³⁵

Ironically, the very ‘mysticism’ Habermas, Ellis *et al* deride Derrida for is extolled, by ‘death-of-God’ theologians such as Thomas Altizer and Mark C. Taylor, as a central element of his thought. Although Altizer identifies a Derrida who “has unveiled his own ground in Lurianic Kabbalism”³⁶, Altizer’s interpretation is by no means a ‘religious’ appropriation of Derrida, but is rather concerned with a “de-mythologising” figure, one who affirms the death of God “with a certain laughter and a certain dance” (150). The Kabbalistic proliferation of meanings, so unacceptable to Ellis and Searle, is celebrated as an affirmation “that the end of history has occurred” (168). For Taylor, Derrida’s overturning of binary oppositions offer “a revolutionary

³⁴ taken from John Searle’s essay “Literary Theory and its Discontents” in Wendell Harris’ *Beyond Poststructuralism*, p107

³⁵ John Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989)

³⁶ taken from “History as Apocalypse” in Thomas J. Altizer (ed), *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) p148

reading of writing that reveals scripture anew”.³⁷ In this sense, deconstruction is “the hermeneutic of the death of God” (6), a gesture which liberates the Book from its Author, the text from its context, to result in “an unending play of surfaces”(16).

With their emphasis on infinite interpretations and indeterminate meanings, such readings of Derrida - both hostile and sympathetic - have in turn provoked their own school of Derrida readings, which we shall call the ‘rigorous’ school for want of a better term. Its main exponents (Culler, Norris, Gasché) insist on the coherence and consistency of Derrida’s writings, often with a clarity of style and argument very different from Derrida’s own distinctive language, and present a ‘serious’ philosopher working in a philosophical tradition of Kant, Hegel and Husserl. Gasché, automatically against any reading of Derrida which would advocate “licentious free play”³⁸, takes it upon himself to carefully and impressively systematize Derrida’s thought, turning *différance* into “the system or chain beyond Being of the various infrastructures or undecidables”.³⁹ What is most interesting about Gasché’s understanding of Derrida and deconstruction is that he sees it not so much as ‘mystifying’ but *explicating*, an “attempt to ‘account for a heterogeneous variety...of discursive inequalities...that continue to haunt even the *successful* development of philosophical arguments”.⁴⁰ In contrast to critics such as Caputo, who sees Derrida as a “hermeneutical trouble-maker”⁴¹, Gasché’s Derrida sorts out and explains the “inconsistencies” in philosophical systems and their expositions.

To some extent, Norris follows the same line. He presents a Derrida who “has distanced his own thinking from a generalized ‘post-modern’ or post-structuralist discourse”.⁴² Norris insists that Habermas has misread Derrida as “reduc(ing) all texts to an undifferentiated ‘freeplay’ of signification”, thus dissolving all “disciplinary borderlines” to turn philosophy into “one kind of writing amongst others, with no special claim to validity or truth”.⁴³ This would be only a “very partial reading” of Derrida, ignoring his “philosophical seriousness” and basing itself on a

³⁷ Mark C. Taylor, *ErRing: A Postmodern A/Theology*, p13

³⁸ Rodolphe Gasché, “Infrastructures and Systematicity” found in John Sallis (ed), *Deconstruction and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) p3

³⁹ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) p177

⁴⁰ “Infrastructures and Systematicity”, *op.cit.*, p4

⁴¹ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p4

⁴² Christopher Norris’ “Deconstruction, Postmodernism and Philosophy: Habermas on Derrida” in David Wood(ed), *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p167

⁴³ *ibid*, p172

handful of well-known moments from the Derridean *oeuvre* (“Limited Inc. abc”, the last paragraph of “Structure, Sign and Play”, the ‘Envois’ section from *La Carte Postale*...).⁴⁴ The idea that Derrida is (in Norris’ words) “in the mainstream tradition from Kant to Husserl and Frege”⁴⁵ is also shared by Culler - as Jeffrey Nealon points out, it is probably Culler’s version of Derrida which has been disseminated the most in American campuses.

Rorty provides one of the most interesting objections to this exclusively philosophical re-appropriation of Derrida. He makes a distinction between the ‘early’ Derrida (*Margins of Philosophy, Writing and Difference, Of Grammatology*) - a serious philosopher who “wants to find words which express the conditions of possibility of all previous theory”⁴⁶, and his later work (*Glas, The Post Card*) which “simply drops theory...in favour of fantasising about those predecessors, playing with them”.⁴⁷ The serious theorist gradually becomes the playful underminer of other people’s theories. Rorty thinks Gasché, Culler *et al* take Derrida too seriously, attributing to him a quasi-transcendental status he doesn’t deserve, paying him “logocentric compliments” when he is, in fact, one of “the enemies of logocentrism”.⁴⁸ For Rorty, Derrida is not so much a ‘theorist’, but simply one who shows the pointlessness of all theorizing in a new and original way.

‘Eastern’ interpretations of Derrida are numerous (Coward, Loy, Yeh) and arouse less controversy than those of Eckhart, if only because Derrida himself has made several references to Eastern languages as a possible model for the ‘Other’ in his thought. In an essay on “Deconstruction and Taoism”, Hong Chu Fu notes a number of superficial similarities with the thought of Lao-Tzu, comparisons which turn out to be “largely negative”⁴⁹, even though they are not without significance. Hong Chu Fu sees the major difference to be one of transcendence - whereas Derrida “displays rigorous reasoning ...to analyze closely various problems”, Taoists are more concerned with “seeking a certain mystical or Taoist transcendence beyond” (317).

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p173

⁴⁵ Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987) p156

⁴⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p123

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p125

⁴⁸ from Rorty’s essay “Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?” in Wood, *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, p237

⁴⁹ Hong Chu Fu, “Deconstruction and Taoism: Comparison Reconsidered” in *Comparative Literature Studies* 29:3 (1992) p317

Coward, in his analysis of Derrida and Indian philosophy, is more assertive. Comparing Sankara's evasions on Brahman with Derrida's 'neither this nor that' depiction of *différance*, Coward arrives at a negated "Brahman" which "is *functionally* not much different" from Derrida's *différance*.⁵⁰ Throughout his writings, Coward adopts a reading of Derrida which is intensely ethical - deconstruction is, we are told at one point, "a means for spiritual realization" which "infuse(s) us with a divine demand for moral action"⁵¹, and in a later book, we learn that "the consideration of human relationships [is] the goal of Derrida's philosophy of language".⁵² In comparing Derrida with possible Eastern counterparts, David Loy probably goes furthest of all, claiming that deconstruction is "from a Buddhist point of view, logocentric".⁵³ Loy compares Derrida with the second-century Buddhist sage Nagarjuna, whose 'sunyata' "parallels the Poststructuralist radicalization of structuralist claims about language" (233). Loy believes that, unlike deconstruction, Nagarjuna's 'sunyata' was not a theory - deconstruction is logocentric "because it seeks liberation through and in language" (239). Our way of solving the problem, says Loy, turns out to be what maintains the problem (248).

Finally, one of the more relevant appraisals of Derrida to be considered - relevant, that is, to the concerns of this thesis - lies in the writings of Kevin Hart. Like Mark C. Taylor, Hart sees deconstruction as "a new way of reading texts".⁵⁴ Unlike Taylor, he does not consider deconstruction to be *a priori* "atheistic", "non-theological" or "counter-theological".⁵⁵ Working with what is probably a Christian agenda, Hart's aim in his 1989 study (as well as his most recent essay this year) is to retrieve deconstruction from "contexts that were at the least secular and at the most determinedly atheistic".⁵⁶ Deconstruction is seen as a useful tool, one which might help work towards the development of a "non-metaphysical theology"⁵⁷ by liberating faith from its metaphysical shackles. In *God Without Being (Dieu Sans L'Être)* Jean-Luc Marion performs a similar re-appropriation of Nietzsche and Heidegger - a

⁵⁰ Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) p204

⁵¹ *ibid*, p216, 222

⁵² Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (New York, 1990) p13

⁵³ David Loy's "The Deconstruction of Buddhism" in Coward(ed), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p227

⁵⁴ Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p19

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p23

⁵⁶ Kevin Hart's essay "The God Effect" in Philip Blond (ed), *Post-secular Philosophy*, p260

Nietzsche who would “affirm new gods” and whose *Götzendämmerung* is “a liberation of the divine”⁵⁸, a Heidegger for whom “to cross out ~~God~~ does not mean God disappears as a concept”, but simply demonstrates “that His unthinkableness saturates our thought”(46). Whether such Christian responses to/appropriations of postmodernity can ever successfully abandon the onto-theo-logic without compromising the essence of their thinking, remains another question.

1.3 Which Pinter?

As in the case of Meister Eckhart and Derrida, any attempt to comprehensively address the proliferating diversity of ‘Pinter-crit’ within two thousand words is doomed to reductive précis and oversimplified paraphrase. Since those fateful first reviews of *The Birthday Party* in May 1958, the wealth of writing on Pinter has mushroomed to Shakespearean proportions. Not simply books on Pinter but books on books on Pinter - most notably Susan Hollis Merritt’s *Pinter in Play* (1990), by far the most exhaustive and dedicated study of Pinter criticism, of what have now become quasi-theological debates over Pinter’s scriptures.⁵⁹ As our study of the Pinter plays involved in this thesis - *The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* - will all include a review of each play’s critical background, the main aim of this section is simply to outline the key areas in the general debate over Pinter’s contribution, whilst referring the reader both to Merritt and to specific parts of this thesis for further elaboration.

The debate, inevitably, begins with Esslin. Although by no means the first person to write about Pinter, Esslin’s early placing of the playwright in his *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) - thereby directly inserting Pinter into a tradition of the Absurd alongside Beckett and Ionesco - remains a significant gesture in any history of Pinter criticism. It supplied the kind of position which critical debates so often need; a central critical view, at first radical, which slowly becomes orthodox and then obsolete, espoused by an influential figure whom critics either rally around or

⁵⁷ Hart, *The Trespass of The Sign*, p21

⁵⁸ Jean Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (trans. Thomas A. Carlson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) p58, 32

⁵⁹ Susan Hollis Merris, *Pinter in Play* (London: Duke University Press, 1990)

violently disagree with. In *The Peopled Wound*⁶⁰, Esslin reiterates his general position, which is by no means a simplistic painting of Pinter the Absurdist. He is keen to stress a certain duality in Pinter, “the most extreme naturalism of surface description” along with the simultaneous evocation of a more surreal “dreamlike, poetic feeling” (229). Although not averse to introducing psychoanalytical motifs into his readings (see my section on *The Homecoming*, 2.2.1) not to mention an insistence on the biographical importance of certain elements of Pinter’s plays, Esslin sees Pinter’s “integrity as a poet” (227) as an important element in any reading - an understanding that Pinter’s vision “is essentially a *lyrical* vision” (233).

Critics such as Hinchliffe and Fricker follow this initial demarcation to a large extent, seeing Pinter largely in the light of European Absurdism and existentialism. Hinchliffe considers Pinter to be “the English representative of the Absurd stage”⁶¹, seeing plays such as *The Dwarfs* as coming “very close to the problems of Roquentin in *Nausea*” (28). Ultimately, we are dealing with a playwright whose language “is employed to make us constantly aware of the essential loneliness of the human condition” (164). Such existential concerns, however, should not blind us to the peculiarly East End flavour of Pinter’s speech - a fortuitous meeting which successfully “combine(s) the European Absurd with native wit” (165). Once again, Pinter the Absurdist blurs with Pinter the Naturalist, perpetuating a debate which has lasted a good deal longer than the critical currency of such terms.

In response to such an ‘Absurdist’ labelling of Pinter, many critics (John Lahr, John Russell Taylor, Katherine J. Worth) have sought to re-emphasize the earthier, ‘real-life’ elements in Pinter’s work, placing him in a much more British ‘kitchen-sink’ tradition (à la Osborne, Simpson and Delaney). Thus John Russell Taylor, whilst acknowledging Pinter’s “air of mystery and uncertainty”⁶², is also equally interested in “an almost uncannily accurate reproduction of everyday speech”, one which leads Taylor to the assertion that Pinter is “the stage’s most ruthless and uncompromising naturalist” (357). Such an emphasis on presenting characters ‘as they are and without stilts’ inevitably leads to Chekhovian comparisons.⁶³ Dukore ,

⁶⁰ Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound* (London: Methuen 1970)

⁶¹ taken from the preface to Arnold Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter* (Boston : Twayne Publishers, 1967)

⁶² John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After*(London: Methuen, 1962) p225

⁶³ see John Lahr’s “Pinter and Chekhov: The Bond of Naturalism” in Arthur Ganz (ed), *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey, 1972) pp60-71

in particular, sees Chekhov's aversion towards 'statement' and insistence upon the artist as "impartial witness" (142) as indicative of Pinter, whose "dialogue conforms to this naturalistic tradition ...of social verisimilitude"⁶⁴. For Dukore, Pinter simply *depicts* - despite such "surface naturalism", there lies beneath no definable, paraphrasable meaning (4).

As language plays such a central part *per se* in Pinter's plays, it is not surprising that a number of studies have devoted themselves to exclusively linguistic analyses of Pinter's texts. Austin Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* (1975) is probably the most important, adopting as it does an unequivocally Wittgensteinian approach. Just as Wittgenstein saw his attempts to resolve philosophy's problems as "showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle", so Quigley sees the only way of overcoming the "impasse in Pinter criticism" is to "clarify the ways in which a Pinter play works".⁶⁵ Quigley sees "proliferation" but not "progression" in Pinter studies, a lack of development which occurs because critics are "unable to build upon accurate perceptions" (22). With this, Quigley has in his sights the "reference theory of meaning" which "dominates our criticism...decades after its inadequacy has been convincingly demonstrated"(27). Andrew Kennedy, although arriving at radically different conclusions, also sees Pinter's use of language as "the principal interest in each play"⁶⁶, one which reaches "a level of mimesis" untouched even by Eliot or Beckett (167).

Female centred-studies of Pinter are by no means as numerous as they should be, given the number of female critics writing on his plays. Michelene Wandor's disappointing *Look Back in Gender* provides nothing more than a standard paraphrase of Pinter's plays, whose main motif is - unsurprisingly - "an obscene authority controlling the values by which people live".⁶⁷ Of much more interest is Elizabeth Sakellariou's *Pinter's Female Portraits* (1988), which sees as its main concern "Pinter's problematic treatment of female characters". Working with a distinctly Freudian/Jungian vocabulary, she sees even in Pinter's later work "a strange lingering fondness ...for closed male circles which lock out any female

⁶⁴ Bernard Dukore, *Harold Pinter* (London: Macmillan 1988) p142-3

⁶⁵ Austin Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975) pxviii

⁶⁶ Andrew Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975) p165

⁶⁷ Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender* (London: Methuen 1987) p33

presence”.⁶⁸ Which is not to say that Pinter’s attitude towards his female characters has stagnated over the years - on the contrary, the “initial biased sexist attitudes” of the earlier works “eventually crystallizes into a gentler, totally androgynous vision” (11).

Such political /ethical possibilities in Pinter - not just the later , more politically conscious plays such as *Mountain Language* but also the earlier works dealt with in this thesis - have not always received the maximum attention, partly because of Pinter’s own understandable attempts to distance his work from any perceivable ‘message’ or ‘statement’. Ruby Cohn and Penelope Prentice provide two examples, separated by almost thirty years, of a very early and a very recent attempt to re-emphasise the ethical in Pinter. Cohn’s famous 1962 essay adopts what is essentially a humanistic reading of Pinter, a playwright whose intention (and here Cohn cites John Wain’s words) “is to assert the importance of humanity in the teeth of whatever is currently trying to annihilate that importance”.⁶⁹ For Cohn, each of Pinter’s plays depicts “the virtual annihilation of an individual” (Gus, Stanley, Davies) - Pinter’s rage is directed against a faceless, anonymous System, which crushes and absorbs the individual into its whole. Prentice’s 1994 study, on the other hand, whilst sharing with Cohn a Pinter who exhibits “a powerful concern with justice”⁷⁰, adopts a rather different route to the ethical in Pinter. Invoking the fractal geometry of chaos theory to “illuminate(s) how the organic structure in Pinter’s work weds the ethic to the aesthetic” (5), Prentice constructs a Pinter who has “levelled easy distinctions between victim and villains” (3). Dissolving not just the victim/villain distinction but also the public/private (“his work consistently dramatizes how private acts have public consequences” 366), Pinter’s drama with its portrayal of dominant/subservient conflicts asks us to reconsider our traditional notions of love and justice, and suggests “the need to return Eros to our ethic in order to reconnect the self with the whole” (365). Both Sakellaridou and Prentice’s discussion of *The Birthday Party* are examined in section 4.2.2.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Sakellaridou, *Pinter’s Female Portraits* (London: Macmillan 1988) p7-8

⁶⁹ Ruby Cohn , “The World of Harold Pinter” in Arthur Ganz (ed), *Pinter: A collection of critical essays*, p79

⁷⁰ Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic* (London: Garland,1994) pxviii

In *The Postmodern Turn*, Ihab Hassan lists Pinter among a tentative canon of fifty-nine 'postmodern' authors.⁷¹ Pinter's radical explorations of language obviously open his work up to postmodern and Poststructuralist interpretations, good and bad. Rodney Simard's consideration of Pinter in his 1984 work *Postmodern Drama*, however, is neither striking nor original: beginning with the promise of a Pinter who purveys "a distinctly postmodern dramatic aesthetic"⁷², we learn that this lies in "a new form of existential realism" (xi), springing from "a synthesis of the realistic mode with Absurdist techniques" (25), a point which has been repeatedly made since Esslin and Taylor. Simard is keen to place Pinter and Albee "among the first generation of postmoderns", essentially because they depict the problems of language - hardly a qualifier for 'postmodern' - and because both playwrights see "the [postmodern] dramatist's function is to expose the interior self" (34). One wonders whether 'dismantle' might not be a more postmodern choice of verb.

"Meaning begins in the words...continues in your head and ends nowhere," writes Pinter. "There is no end to meaning".⁷³ There has certainly been no end to the meanings Pinter's critics have ascribed to Pinter's plays - one could go on categorising such interpretations, listing them in all their diversity (Wardle's socio-biological reading, Braunmuller's interest in memory, Morrison's study of the anecdote in Pinter, Davison's placing of the playwright in the British music hall tradition, not to mention Almansi and Henderson's classic study of Pinter the Liar...). For now, however, it has simply sufficed to show the breadth and scope of Pinter-criticism, before going on to examine some of the plays themselves.

Why Pinter?

At this point, one may ask the question: why has Pinter been chosen, as opposed to any other playwright - Beckett, Celan, Eliot? That Derrida and Eckhart are to be considered together is understandable enough, given Derrida's considerable interest in Eckhart over the years. But why has Pinter (a writer who has little interest in the medieval, who has never read Eckhart and whose works in this study were written well

⁷¹ Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987) p84

⁷² Rodney Simard, *Postmodern Drama* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984) px

⁷³ taken from a letter to Peter Wood, May 1958 - cit. in Michael Scott(ed), *Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming* (London: Macmillan Casebook Series, 1986) p80.

before Derrida and 'deconstruction' had reached any level of fame) been chosen for examination alongside a medieval mystic and a French Post-structuralist?

First of all, it is the author's conviction that no dramatist - not even Beckett - makes greater use of uncertainty in all its forms, be it the 'mystery-thriller' (two strangers arriving at a bedsit in a seaside town) or the 'unresolvable-dilemma' (characters displaying conflicting modes of behaviour). Pinter's characters deal with, exploit and suffer from uncertainty - either those who desperately seek to grasp 'what's going on' (Max and Joey in *The Homecoming*, Davies in *The Caretaker*, Meg in *The Birthday Party*) or those who have understood the unstable play of signs around them and ruthlessly exploit it (Ruth, Lenny, Mick, Goldberg and McCann). Insofar as we are looking at how uncertainty is understood in Eckhart and Derrida, Pinter's plays offer us valuable insights.

Secondly, the notorious ambiguities inherent in Pinter's dialogue, their often eerie feel and even eerier silences, all serve to illustrate Derrida's idea of the undecidable, Gödelesque play between opposite points of meaning (Is Ruth's farewell to Teddy in *The Homecoming* mocking or sincere? Is Aston's hospitality towards Davies at the start of *The Caretaker* genuine or a sinister, disarming ploy?), a theme we shall be examining in closer detail in the following chapters. In a sense, the language of Pinter's plays shows, more than any other playwright, deconstruction 'in action' - the semantic shifts in meaning every time a remark is repeated, the polysemic multiplicity which beleaguers every attempt to say 'what we really mean', the unwanted/unexpected interpretation of irony and cliché - lending strange, new meanings to familiar phrases, the impossibility of repetition...Pinter's dialogue radically makes us think about meaning and how we produce it, indeed, if we can ever re-produce it. As such, it is difficult to think of a more appropriate playwright for a study of deconstruction.

Finally, the plays featured in this study all concern three main themes which we will be examining in Eckhart and Derrida - whylessness (the absence of motives and goals), the concept of wandering and the power of the secret. In all of Pinter's plays, characters perform actions with no obvious reason behind them: Max's aggression towards Ruth, Mick's spontaneous abuse of Davies, Goldberg's abduction of Stanley, the murder of Gus...all of these instances offer a sinister version of Eckhart's "Man Without Why", as we shall see in Chapter Three. For our meditations on the idea of wandering in Eckhart and Derrida, *no* play offers us a clearer basis for our

investigations than *The Caretaker*. Pinter's wandering tramp quickly becomes, in our study, a metaphor for the Derridean wandering text, forever subject to endless reappropriations, forever wandering from one context to another. And finally, as this study concludes with an examination of the secret in negative theology and deconstruction (Is Eckhart's God really nothing more than a forever deferred secret? Is there a secret to Derrida's *différance*?), plays such as *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, with their air of mystery, their concealed information and hermeneutic puzzles, offer an interesting perspective on the 'secret' in Eckhart and Derrida - and the secret, possibly, that there is no secret.

Chapter Two: Uncertainty and the Critique of Presence

2.1 Negative Theology, Deconstruction and the Unpresentable: Analogies and Parallels.

This section has one clear, overriding purpose in mind: to examine in both Eckhart and Derrida an analogous *distrust* towards the language of certainty, and an equally analogous *affirmation* of uncertainty. As we are dealing with texts that lie almost seven centuries apart, the word "analogous" has to be stressed: it does not mean 'equivalent', 'interchangeable' or 'the same', words which would make a preposterous claim upon texts which have been produced by radically different scenarios. This does not mean to say that the various *analogies* drawn between negative theology and deconstruction in this chapter might not, given further research, develop into *genealogies*, a possibility which - however tempting - would lie outside the scope of this project. For simplicity's sake, attention must be focused and restricted upon comparisons between the texts themselves.

Readers already familiar with Derrida will not be surprised at seeing a contemporary French theorist examined in such close relation to a fourteenth century Dominican master. As early as 1964, Derrida - within the pages of *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* - already displays a revealing knowledge of "Maître Eckhart" and his vernacular sermons, not to mention the telling awareness of a possible resemblance to the language of deconstruction.¹ This awareness becomes more expressed in the 1968 lecture "La 'différance'", where Derrida relates how "the detours, locutions and syntax [*les détours, les périodes, la syntaxe*] in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable [*parfois à s'y méprendre*] from negative theology".² It is this relationship between deconstruction and

¹The essay concerned was "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas" - found in Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967) pp117-228, translated by Alan Bass (*Writing and Difference* [London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978]).

² Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972) - translation by Alan Bass (*Margins of Philosophy* [Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982]) p6,6. Page numbers of French /

negative theology - a current in medieval thought beginning with the sixth century Pseudo Dionysius and culminating in Eckhart - which has drawn so much recent attention, particularly from theologians such as Mark C. Taylor (*ErRing, Deconstructing Theology*) and Kevin Hart (*The Trespass of the Sign*).³

In order to avoid wild, transhistorical claims about the relationship between Derrida's and Eckhart's various texts, a brief look at what kind of certainty they were calling into question is essential. Once we have understood the difference of their respective frameworks, then we can begin to talk about the parallels.

2.1.1 Contexts: The Theologian and the Theorist.

One of Eckhart's favourite quotations is taken from Augustine's *De Trinitate*: "What one says of God is not true, and what one does not say of Him is true".⁴ It provides an idea of God as pure Otherness, the elusive signified, the permanent ontological inverse of everything we think and say. Eckhart's insistence on the ineffability of God is typically expressed in His namelessness:

God has many names in scripture. But I say that if someone perceives something in God and gives it a name, then that is not God. God is above names and nature...There is no name we can design for God.

*Man nennet ouch got in der schrift mit vil namen. Ich spriche: swer iht bekennet in gote und im deheinen namen anekleibet, daz enist got niht. Got ist über namen und über natüre...Wir enmügen keinen namen vinden, den wir gote mügen geben.*⁵

Such passages place Eckhart directly in opposition to a tradition of affirmative or *cataphatic* theology which insisted (in John Scotus Eriugena's words) that God could be "reasonably signified causally from things of which it is the cause".⁶ Affirmative theology believed one could speak meaningfully and truthfully about

German editions will be given in **bold**.

³ Mark C. Taylor, *ErRing: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986) and Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

⁴James Clark (ed), *Meister Eckhart* (London: Nelson & Sons, 1957) p159

⁵Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994) p129. German text used is Josef Quint, *Meister Eckhart: Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1936ff) 2:533-4 - taken from Sermon 53, *Misit dominus manum suam*

⁶A.Hyman & J.Walsh(eds), *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1973)

God. Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae*, maintains with some reservations that divine names "signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of representing Him".⁷

Negative or apophatic theology, in its most orthodox form, was seen as a complement to this: God could not be understood through what *was*, but only through what was not. If God really is, as Eckhart says, paraphrasing Avicenna, "a being to whom nothing is or can be similar"⁸, then knowledge of God can never be linguistically mediated, as God is radically incommensurable (in the most Kierkegaardian sense of the word - "the absence of a unit of measure in terms of which two entities can both be measured exactly").⁹ Eckhart's deity - as opposed to the knowable, comprehensible God of Christian orthodoxy - is a God of infinite mystery, one who recedes before all our propositions: it is not difficult to see in this, as a number of commentators already have, a limited but nevertheless prescient critique of presence - what Tracey calls, in reference to the apophatic tradition, "characteristically postmodern suspicions of all modern language of presence and self".¹⁰ Negative theology calls into question a certain *confidence* in language about God, hence assertions such as Kevin Hart's: "My position is not that deconstruction is a form of negative theology, but that negative theology is a form of deconstruction".¹¹ Of course, a point must be made here which will be repeated again and again: negative theology, in its critique of presence, did not see anything problematic about language *in itself*, but only language which tried to represent the ineffable. The idea that all language is inherently unstable, that there is a kind of restless play at work within even the most unambiguous assertions, is a belief peculiar to Derrida: far from embarking upon any investigation of language

p141

⁷taken from Part One, Question XIII of the *Summa* - found in Hyman & Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* p491

⁸Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p179 - taken from Avicenna's *Metaphysicae*, Lib ix, ch 1

⁹Alistair Hannay's note to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alistair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) p152

¹⁰David Tracey, "Literary Theory and the Return of Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology" *Journal of Religion* 74 :3 (1994) p313

¹¹Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p186

in general, Eckhart only becomes suspicious about the adequacy of words when they are used to talk about God.

In addition to challenging the confidence of affirmative theology, Eckhart also proposed an element of uncertainty through his own hermeneutics by suggesting that a biblical text may well have a progressively infinite number of meanings:

...there is none so wise that when he tries to fathom it, he will not find it deeper yet and discover more in it. Whatever we may hear, and whatever anyone can tell us, contains another hidden sense.

...vnnnd es ist auch niemant so weyss, der sy gründen woll, er fynde sy tieffer vnnnd fynde mer darinn. Alles, das wir hie horen mogen, vnnnd alles, das man vns gesagen mag, das hat alles eynen anderen, verborgen synn darinn.¹²

For Eckhart even the most learned man will never get to the bottom of the scriptures; something will always elude him. It is a situation analogous to the defining of God, who - like Eckhart's idea of scriptural interpretation - is without end, *Ab-grund*. This is in contrast to the general attitude towards biblical exegesis in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which acknowledged the manifold meanings inherent in scripture, but insisted on a *finite* number of them, in most cases three or four. Scholastics such as Alexander of Hales, St Bonaventure and Aquinas followed either Hugh of St Victor's insistence on the historical, allegorical and tropological (moral) possibilities of a verse¹³, or Bede's addition to these of an "anagogical understanding".¹⁴ Perhaps, of all Eckhart's near contemporaries, only St Bonaventure comes closest to suggesting that the divine page may well possess an infinite depth - in his *Breviloquium*, he writes how "under the shell of the obvious literal meaning are hidden mystical and profound understandings". For this reason, the scriptures have "manifold meaning so that [they] may win over every mind".¹⁵ And yet "manifold" may still not mean "infinite" here.

¹² M. O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises* (London: Watkins, 1979) vol 2, p250 - Sermon 51, Quint 2:467

¹³ from Hugh of St Victor's *De Sacramentis*, I.Prol.iv, found in A.J.Minnis & A.B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism Circa 1100- 1375* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) p222

¹⁴ *ibid*, p234

¹⁵ *Breviloquium*, Prol., 4-6, taken from Minnis & Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism* p234

Like Mallarmé's poem and the Socratic dialogue in *Dissemination*, the Holy Scriptures for Eckhart "definitively escape any exhaustive treatment" (*se dérobent définitivement à toute exhaustion*)¹⁶, not "because of a certain fold" (*un certain pli*) within the text, but because the Holy Scriptures are so profound (literally "deeper") that the finite mind can never quite master the ineffably divine intention which lies behind them, forever regressing. It is a difference we shall return to shortly.

If Eckhart insists upon the ineffable God in the face of affirmative theology, then Derrida insists upon the ungovernable text in the face of literary structuralism. This insistence is best examined in one of Derrida's earliest essays, "Force and signification", which first appeared within the pages of *Critique* in 1963. The title of the essay - a play on the title of the work it deals with, Jean Rousset's 1962 study of Corneille, *Forme et Signification* - effectively sums up many of Derrida's basic disagreements with structuralism, described as "a relaxation, if not a lapse, of the attention given to force" (*une détente, sinon une lapsus, dans l'attention à la force*).¹⁷ Throughout the essay, Rousset's own brand of structuralism, the confidence with which he produces his structural analyses of *Le Cid* and *Polyeucte* ("with such a mastery one wonders whether the credit is due Corneille or Rousset")¹⁸, is portrayed as a consistent forgetting of a certain energy within the text, a lamentable obliviousness towards the play which is always already at work within Corneille.

Therefore, Derrida's objections to Rousset (whose *Forme et Signification*, it does not take long to realise, ultimately serve Derrida as a springboard toward the chief tenets of structuralism in general) are three in number and interrelated. Firstly, the concept of the structure initially implemented as an aid towards analysis, "becomes *in fact and despite his theoretical intention* the critic's sole preoccupation"(15). The text, sacrificed for the sake of structure, simply becomes an excuse to talk about the structure - leading Derrida to speak of Rousset's efforts as an "ultrastructuralism"(16). Derrida is keen to emphasise this - one almost expects to encounter the word 'fetishism' - as it brings him to his second objection:

¹⁶taken from Peggy Kamuf (ed), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p173 - Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) **p183**

¹⁷Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p4, **11**

so captivating is the attention given to structure, one "risks being interested in the figure itself to the detriment of the play going on within it metaphorically [*au détriment du jeu qui s'y joue par métaphore*]"¹⁹ In other words, Rousset becomes so interested in *forme*, he forgets about *force*. In this sense, structuralism can almost be seen as a minimal desire for certainty, the desire for a structure which might eliminate - or at least contain - the chaotic play within a text. "Structuralism above all insists upon preserving the coherence and completion of each totality at its own level"(26). For Derrida (third objection), this is the very thing which cannot be done. The desire to preserve a totality, to speak meaningfully and above all consistently about the 'autonomy' of a work, would be to "attempt to forget difference" (*vouloir oublier la différence*)²⁰, to forget uncertainty, to forget the dynamic nature of textuality and pretend that things *stand still* within a text.

Although Derrida's essay is a specific response to a specific text, "Force and Signification " is by no means simply a critique of a contemporary work on Corneille. Derrida clearly has other things in mind - Rousset's version of literary structuralism was simply the nearest logocentrism at hand. In Rousset's obsession with form lies the reason "why literary criticism is structuralist in every age, in its essence and destiny".²¹ It is an obsession, to paraphrase Derrida, which either denies or forgets that the play of meaning *always* overflows signification - an obsession hardly exclusive to Rousset.

2.1.2. Différance and the Godhead: "indistinguishable" terminologies?

The most important thing we learn from Derrida's essay on Rousset is that the text is never *present*. No matter how coherent and meticulous a structure is created to explain the text, the interpretation of the text will always be rendered incomplete by "the impossibility of its ever being present, of its ever being

¹⁸ *Writing and Difference*, p19

¹⁹ *ibid* p16, *L'Écriture* 29

²⁰ *Writing and Difference* p13, *L'Écriture* 24

²¹ *ibid*, p5

summarised by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness".²² Having briefly examined the different historical contexts in which Derrida and Eckhart are writing, we shall now go on to consider the oft-cited similarities in the terms used by both negative theologians and deconstructionists, by comparing the language used to describe the concepts - or rather non-concepts - of "différance" and "the Godhead".

In his essay on Edmond Jabès, Derrida writes: "It is thus simultaneously true that things come into existence and lose their existence by being named".²³ In a sense, negative theology's opposition towards the naming of God was a recognition of this very fact: firstly, there was a danger that in speaking about God, one would actually create one's own God - that is, by naming something one actually brings into existence something which has nothing to do with the Unnamable. Secondly, by attempting to apply a name to God substantially, one might actually be committing an act of blasphemy - by attempting to finitize the infinite, to approach the unapproachable. One might even say that negative theology exhibited a *fear* of presence, a desire that God should never acquire it fully - after all, as Derrida says in *Dissemination*: "if ...an undeferred *logos* were possible, it would not seduce anyone" (*si...un logos non différé était possible, il ne séduirait pas*).²⁴ And yet, the New Testament God was a God of love, of nearness and intimacy, the God one could call "abba" (lit. "Daddy"): there *had* to be some kind of knowledge.

Eckhart's response to this was to replicate a Gnostic gesture made a millennium earlier: that is, to produce two Gods, a God one could speak of, and a God one could not, called the Godhead (*Gottheit*). True faith consisted in a "breakthrough" (*Durchbruch*), bypassing the intelligible, comprehensible God in order to reach the Godhead, the God with no name. John Caputo, in his

²²ibid,p14

²³ *Writing and Difference*, p70

²⁴*Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlon, 1987) p71, *La Dissémination* 80

comparative study of Eckhart and the later Heidegger, writes how "the deepest ground and essence of ...God Himself... lies in a nameless region from which all properties and attributes (*Eigenschaften*) are excluded".²⁵ Whereas Eckhart's God is very much what post-structuralists call the "onto-theo-logical" God, the comprehensible, accessible deity of Christian orthodoxy, loving, kind, just, Eckhart's Godhead is an attempt to talk about the mystical space which lies behind, beyond this God, which enables God to be. Nevertheless, given the fact that Eckhart's Godhead is a nameless, quality-less space, Eckhart does say a surprising amount about it; the Godhead is invariably described as an "abyss" (*Abgrund*), a "desert", the "divine dark" and a "nothingness":

"Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes he saw nothing." I cannot see what is One. He saw nothing, that is to say, God. God is nothingness, and yet God is a something. What is something is also nothing. What God is, He is totally. Therefore the illuminated Dionysius, wherever he writes about God, says: he is super-being, he is super-life, he is super-light. He does not attribute to him any of these [qualities], but he intimates through them that he is an - I do not know what - that lies far beyond them. If you visualize anything or if anything enters your mind, that is not God; indeed, he is neither this nor that. Whoever says that God is here or there, do not trust him. The light that is God shines in the darkness. God is a true light. To see it one must be blind and one must divest God of everything that there is. A master says: to speak of God in any simile is to speak of Him in an impure mode. But whoever speaks of God through nothingness speaks of him to the point.

*"Paulus stuont ûf von der erden, und mit offenen ougen ensach er niht." Ich enmac niht gesehen, daz ein ist. Er sach niht, daz was got. Got ist ein niht, und got ist ein iht. Swaz iht ist, daz ist ouch niht. Swaz got ist, daz ist er alzemâle. Dâ von sprichet der liehte Dionysius, wâ er von gote schrîbet, dâ sprichet er: er ist über wesen, er ist über leben, er ist über lieht; er engibet im noch diz noch daz, und er meinet, daz er sî neizwaz, daz gar verre dar über sî. Der iht sihet oder vellet iht in dîn bekennen, daz enist got niht; dâ von niht, wan er noch diz noch daz enist. Swer sprichet, daz got hie oder dâ sî, dem engloubet niht. Daz lieht, daz got ist, daz liuhtet in der vinsternisse. Got ist ein wâr lieht; swer daz sehen sol, der muoz blint sîn und muoz got al abenemen von ihte. Ein meister sprichet: swer von gote redet bî deheiner glichnisse, der redet unlüterliche von im. Der aber bî nihte von gote redet, der redet eigenliche von im.*²⁶

Although there are a number of points to be drawn from this passage, our principal aim is to show how Derrida can say that the "detours, locutions and syntax" of

²⁵ John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press 1978) p123

²⁶ Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) p125, Quint 3:

différance are similar to Eckhart's passages on the Godhead, "even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology".²⁷

The 'resemblance' between the passages on différance in Derrida's essay and the descriptions of the Godhead in Eckhart's vernacular sermons manifests itself in seven ways. Firstly (and most importantly), they are both nameless and unnamable, albeit for different reasons. Eckhart's Godhead is "free of all names" as there is no noise one could make, no characters one could write, which would adequately convey its ineffability. In the paragraph immediately preceding the passage quoted above, Eckhart gives four reasons why the soul might not name God, of which the third is of particular interest to us: "The third reason is that it does not have enough time to name him. It cannot turn away long enough from love".²⁸ Eckhart almost says here that one cannot love and name at the same time - that in order to name something, one must turn away from it. To name, therefore, is to indicate an absence. If one wishes to know God, the last thing one should do is name Him.

Derrida is quite keen to point out that if différance *is* unnamable, it is "not because our language has not yet found or received this name...outside the finite system of our own".²⁹ Although one might be tempted here to think of the Hebrew unnamable name, Lossky's *nomen innominabile*, Derrida is actually referring to Heidegger. Différance is unnamable because "there is no name for it at all...not even that of différance".³⁰ Having distanced himself from Heideggerian nostalgia with the remark that différance is "Older than Being itself", Derrida goes on in the next paragraph to repeat the dissociative operation, this time with regard to negative theology. The unnamable "is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach" but rather "the play which makes possible nominal effects" (*le jeu qui fait q'il y a des effets nominaux*).³¹

223-4 - taken from Sermon 71, *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra*

²⁷ *Margins of Philosophy*, p6, *Les Marges* 6

²⁸ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p125

²⁹ *Margins of Philosophy* p26, 28

³⁰ *ibid*, p26, 28

³¹ *ibid*, p26, 28

Another resemblance between the Godhead and *différance* is that both are literally unthinkable: they are terms which, both authors insist, can never acquire presence. Eckhart's God cannot be thought because, following Dionysius, He is *hyperousia*, beyond being: "If you visualize anything or if anything enters your mind, that is not God".³² Eckhart's Godhead cannot be thought because he is a being (*ov*) which has no relation (can have no relation) to actuality. In other words, it is His incommensurability which renders him unthinkable. However, the 'a' in *différance* "cannot be exposed" because "*différance* is ...what makes possible the presentation of the being-present".³³ Since *différance* is a kind of play, not an unknowable being, there is no presence to try and think, and therefore its unthinkability, although superficially identical to Eckhart's, is of a radically different kind: "One cannot think the trace - and therefore *différance* - on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present".³⁴

This common ground of "namelessness" and "unthinkability" with regard to *différance* and the Godhead, however differently constituted, does lead us onto a string of similar points, most of which repeat the same basic point again but which are worthwhile mentioning, as they elucidate this point from a variety of different, interesting perspectives. Firstly, both the Godhead and *différance* are neither sensible nor intelligible - one can neither touch nor conceive them. Derrida's famous insistence that *différance* "is literally neither a word nor a concept"³⁵ echoes that oft-repeated Eckhartian tenet that God "is neither this nor that, and yet He is a something", a characteristically Dionysian pronouncement. The second resemblance lies in the fact that the movement of *différance* "eludes both vision and hearing" and ultimately works within "an order which no longer belongs to sensibility ...But neither...to intelligibility".³⁶ Neither the sensible nor the intelligible can capture the movement of *différance*, just as "that which has being,

³² Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p125

³³ *Margins of Philosophy*, p6

³⁴ *ibid*, p21

³⁵ *ibid*, p3

³⁶ *ibid*, p3

time or place does not reach God".³⁷ This idea manifests itself in another resemblance: that of sitelessness. "Whoever says that God is here or there, do not trust him".³⁸ As the Godhead is the inverse of the present, it has no latitude or longitude, it cannot be anchored to a city or a name. Similarly, "the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence...*it properly has no site*".³⁹ The immediate consequence of this (fourth resemblance) is that both *différance* and the Godhead cannot be expounded upon directly, through what they are, but *indirectly*, through what they are not. Harvey makes much of this in an excellent chapter of her *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, where she quite literally lists 26 things that deconstruction is not, ranging from "a) metaphysics" through "m) 'un coup des Dés', as per Mallarmé" to "z) the celebration of a Wake, as per Joyce".⁴⁰ "I can speak of this graphic difference only through a very indirect discourse on writing".⁴¹ In a sense, Derrida's lecture on "La différence" is an attempt to say what cannot be said - in the open pages Derrida quickly demonstrates himself to be articulately aware of this problem. Even lectures on *différance* fall prey to *différance*, which explains why Derrida consistently refuses to provide any clear, concise definition of what *différance* 'means', choosing to abandon the direct approach of naming and defining for the oblique way, the way of inference, allusion, negation. Interestingly enough, in an article written years after his famous lecture on *différance*, Derrida confesses to this predilection towards 'obliqueness':

Instead of tackling the question or the problem head on, directly, straightforwardly, which would doubtless be impossible, inappropriate or illegitimate, should we proceed obliquely? I have often done so, even to the point of demanding obliqueness by name...⁴²

In this use of the word oblique, one almost senses the anticipation of a certain *curve*, the apprehension of a certain *shift*, the suspicion that one should never name the destinations one wishes to arrive at. Eckhart puts it similarly: "...to speak of

³⁷Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p205 - from the sermon *Quasi stella matutina*

³⁸Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p125

³⁹*Margins of Philosophy*, p24 - italics mine

⁴⁰Irene Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) p23

⁴¹*Margins of Philosophy*, p4 - Italics mine

⁴²David Wood(ed), *Derrida : A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p11

God through any simile is to speak of Him in an impure mode. But whoever speaks of God through nothingness speaks of him to the point".⁴³ Through this comparison with Derrida's own 'method', one can perhaps better understand Eckhart's own attempt to speak of God as an infinite nothingness rather than a finite something. Aware of the problematic nature of naming God in order to talk about what He is, Eckhart's approach is necessarily oblique: one must negate God's attributes, not define them, in order to truly understand what they are.

Nothingness.

The final similarity between the vocabularies of Eckhart and Derrida consists in a positive appropriation of nothingness - a word which both *différance* and the Godhead are referred to as ; nothingness no longer conceived as the absence of presence, but as the absence which enables presence to present itself . The experiencing of nothing - as Heidegger says - " the vastness of ...which gives every being the warrant to be".⁴⁴ This final similarity differs from the ones we have considered up to now, inasmuch as it constitutes a resemblance which may not be completely superficial. What I now propose to do is examine, in turn, exactly how both writers present their ideas of nothingness through *différance* and the Godhead, and whether the similarities in terminology ultimately betray any deeper and more substantial affinities.

To understand Eckhart's concept of the Godhead as a 'productive' nothingness, one must first understand the Godhead's relation to God. The image Eckhart supplies us with is that of a "desert" (*einoede*), the very symbol of aridity. For Caputo, the Godhead is to be contrasted with God in these very terms: God as fecundity/fountain /word, in opposition to the Godhead as sterility /desert/silence.⁴⁵ And yet, despite such negative imagery, the Godhead is a positive creative force, the "source" and groundless ground of God. Again, Schürmann writes: "The desert

⁴³ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p125

⁴⁴ Postscript to *What Is Metaphysics ?* - found in David Krell (ed), *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978) p108

is full of seed, but they do not sprout there." (115) The *potentia* of the Godhead does not become *actualitas* within the silent stillness of the Godhead but outside it. "The Godhead is silence; but in the 'birth' of the Son the Father speaks His word".⁴⁶ The Godhead is anterior to God, just as silence is anterior to language. It is the nothingness of the Godhead which enables entities to come into being.

The silence of the Godhead is that from which all language springs, just as the nameless region beyond God is the source of all names. This is why Schürmann interprets the Godhead as "a quest for the origin of God and the origin of his attributes".⁴⁷ Caputo describes the process in a chapter on Heidegger:

God is a process of welling up from concealment into self-revelation- first into the Son and the Holy Ghost, then into the creation itself. God emerges from the darkness of the Godhead...the abyss (*Abgrund*)...into the light of day, into 'God' and 'creatures'.⁴⁸

Caputo's Heideggerian language is unmistakable, although the passage Caputo refers to in his concept of ebullition is actually a passage taken from the latin works:

Life means a certain overflow by which a thing, welling up within itself, first completely floods itself, each part of itself interpenetrating every other, before it pours itself out and spills over into something external.⁴⁹

The Godhead, it would seem, is no longer still but subject to a 'welling up within itself' - hence the term "ebullition", *ex-bullitio*, which literally means a 'boiling over'. This suggests a dynamic principle within the Godhead, an unseen, one might almost say oscillating motion which ultimately wells up out of the abyss to spill into language in the form of "God" and of "creatures". The terms are not entirely dissimilar from Heidegger's advance (*hervorkommen*) and withdrawal (*sich entziehen*) of Being⁵⁰: the idea of a dynamic nothingness, prior to all divinity, is an

⁴⁵ Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, p128

⁴⁶ Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, p129

⁴⁷ p71 - which is presumably why Eckhart was condemned in the papal bull for wanting "to know more than he should." cit. in Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p254

⁴⁸ Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, p190

⁴⁹ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p260

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage* (London: Vision Press, 1956) p75. However, it should not be forgotten that a genealogy of the movement of both Eckhart's overflowing Oneness and the later

utterly mystical idea - as Nicolas Berdyaev says, speaking of Eckhart and Boehme, it constitutes "the deepest and most secret idea of German mysticism".⁵¹

Like the Godhead, *différance* is nameless and yet the 'source' of all names, the nothingness "which makes possible nominal effects".⁵² *Différance* constitutes a nothingness inasmuch that it is not an *ens separatissimus*, a concept or an entity one can refer to independently of what it does. It is a non-entity which enables entities to be, a nothingness which "differs from itself, defers itself, and writes itself as *différance*".⁵³ The idea of *différance* as an errant, intangible yet nevertheless generative "movement", one which works forever within a kind of non-space - the fold in a piece of paper, the hinge in a door - is best illustrated with a passage from *Dissemination*, in an analysis of Mallarmé's poem "Mimique". Derrida, insisting that the narrator of "Mimique" "imitates nothing", and that there "is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures"⁵⁴, begins to speak of the poem as a profusion of gestures emanating from *rien*, from *le rien*, itself a word which, with every repetition, gradually acquires a peculiar resonance of its own:

...this operation is not a unified entity but the manifold play of a scene that, illustrating nothing - neither word nor deed - beyond itself, illustrates nothing. Nothing but the many faceted multiplicity of a lustre which itself is nothing beyond its own fragmented light. Nothing but the idea which is nothing. The ideality of the idea is here for Mallarmé the still metaphysical name that is still necessary in order to mark nonbeing, the nonreal, the nonpresent. This mark points, alludes without breaking the glass, to the beyond of Beingness, toward the *epekeina tes ousias* ...It is a dramatisation which *illustrates nothing*, which illustrates *the nothing*, lights up a space, re-marks a spacing as a nothing, a blank: white as a yet unwritten page, blank as a difference between two lines.

L'operation...n'est pourtant pas une unité mais le jeu multiple d'une scène qui, n'illustrant rien hors d'elle-même, parole ou acte, n'illustre rien. Rien que la

Heidegger's manifesting and withdrawing Being would ultimately lead us back to the Neoplatonic tradition - namely, Plotinus: "Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has overflowed and its exuberance has produced the new..." *Ennead*, V.2.1, cit. in Gerard Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1994) p73

⁵¹Kaufmann, Walter, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956) p34. Boehme, who was familiar with Eckhart's writings, is recognised by most scholars to have taken his notion of the divine Ungrund (*Ungrund*), the unfathomable depths of the pre-divinity, from Eckhart's *Abgrund*, abyss.

⁵²*Margins of Philosophy*, p26

⁵³*Writing and Difference*, p78

⁵⁴*Dissemination*, p193-4

*multiplicité facettée du lustre qui n'est rien, lui-même, hors de sa lumière fragmentée. Rien que l'idée qui n'est rien. L'idéalité de l'idée est ici, pour Mallarmé, le nom, encore métaphysique, encore nécessaire pour marquer le non-étant, le non-réel ou le non-présent; cette marque indique, fait allusion sans briser la glace vers l'au-delà de 'étantité, vers l' epekeina tes ousias... Mise en scène qui n'illustre rien, qui illustre le rien, éclair l'espace, re-marque l'espacement comme rien, comme blanc: blanc comme une page pas encore écrite ou comme différence entre les traits.*⁵⁵

Before going on to examine this evocative and difficult passage, let us consider for comparison an instance from Eckhart's own sermon on nothingness, based on the verse from Acts 9:8 "Saul rose from the ground, opened his eyes and saw nothing" (*Surrexit autem Saulus de terra apertisque oculis nihil videbat*):

When the mind penetrates into the One, entering in pure dereliction of itself, it finds God as in a nothingness. A man had a dream, a daydream: it seemed to him that he was big with nothingness as a woman is with a child. In this nothingness God was born. He was the fruit of nothingness. God was born in nothingness. This is why it says: "He rose from the ground and with open eyes he saw nothing."

*Swenne diu sêle kumet in ein und si dâ inne tritet in ein lûter verworfenheit ir selber, dâ vindet si got als in einem nihte. Ez dûhte einen menschen als in einem troume - ez was ein wachender troum - , wie ez swanger würde von nihte als ein vrouwe mit einem kinde, und in dem nihte wart got geboren; dër was diu vruht des nihtes. Got wart geboren in dem nihte. Dâ von sprichet er: "er stuont ûf von der erden, und mit offenen ougen sach er niht".*⁵⁶

In both extracts, a certain generative process is being examined. In the first passage, it is how a pen produces - or 'unveils' - a text, and how a text produces a reading of a text, that is being considered. In the second passage from Eckhart the question is theological but the "movement", as Derrida calls it, is essentially the same: the birth of Christ in the soul, the re-production of God in the world. In both passages, nothingness precedes the generative act, instigates it, brings the generated into being. In both passages the "movement" described is one - to use Derrida's own words - of *aletheia* as opposed to *adequatio*, an unveiling as opposed to an imitation. The comparison is by no means stretched: intentionally or no, the terms and images Derrida uses in the passage, a passage which deals with singularly literary preoccupations, have a peculiarly Neoplatonic ring about them,

⁵⁵A Derrida Reader, p182, *La Dissémination* 236

employing phrases which readers of Eckhart will already be familiar with: nothingness, multiplicity, fragmented light (in Eckhart the *funklein* or divine spark in the soul), the notion of the idea as the "still metaphysical name" and, above all, the phrase *epekeina tes ousias*, the 'beyond' of Being where Plato situated his Good and the Neoplatonists their God. When Derrida refers to Levinas' use of this phrase in "Violence and Metaphysics"⁵⁷, it is used to support Derrida's own admiring but ultimately suspicious critique of Levinas' phenomenology - his suspicion, in the end, that Levinas' "face of the infinitely Other" is just another Yahweh, another "passageway to essentiality"⁵⁸, dressed up in Heideggerian language. In other words, Derrida sees *epekeina tes ousias* as another name for God.

If one were to suggest that the movement of Derrida's discourse runs along the same series of Neoplatonic grooves as Eckhart's - the nothingness and essential non-presence of the text spilling over into a blossoming plurality of significations in much the same way Eckhart's Godhead overflows (*ebullitio*) into the ground of the soul - then one would have to look no further than the first essay in *Writing and Difference* for an example of such a hypothesis. Eckhart writes: "God overflows into all creatures, and yet he remains untouched by all." (*Got vliuzet in alle creaturen, und blibet er doch unberüeret von in allen*).⁵⁹ In Derrida we read: "If the play of meaning can overflow signification...this overflow is the moment of the attempt-to-write" (*si le jeu du sens peut déborder la signification...ce débord est le moment du vouloir écrire*).⁶⁰ Of course, we must tread carefully here. In considering the translator's fortuitous choice of a common word in English, there is a danger of falling prey to what Wittgenstein called "the bewitchment of our intelligence by language" - that is, assuming the translated word 'overflow' to mean the same thing in both sentences, whereas the original words (*déborder* and *vliuzen*) may well have radically different meanings. Nevertheless, in both quotations a certain *excess*, a certain *outpouring* is indicated. It is in both cases an

⁵⁶Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart* p126, Quint 3: 224-5 - from Sermon 71, *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra*

⁵⁷*Writing and Difference*, p140

⁵⁸*ibid* p134

⁵⁹Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart* p123, Largier p70 - taken from the sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus*

⁶⁰*Writing and Difference*, p12, 24

overflowing which does not seek to equate (*ad-equatio*) itself with anything, but which nevertheless proceeds from a nothingness. And it is in Derrida's and Eckhart's ultimately different conceptions of the word 'nothingness' that our principal distinction lies.

We already know that *différance* is not a being (*ov*) and "does not exist".⁶¹ In a passage from *Dissemination*, quoted by Gasché at the beginning of his own work on what he calls Derrida's "System beyond being", Derrida offers an important analogy towards the understanding of the role of *différance* and its relation to nothingness:

The breakthrough towards radical otherness...always takes, *within philosophy*, the *form* of an a posteriority or an empiricism. But this is an effect of the specular nature of philosophical reflection, philosophy being incapable of inscribing (comprehending) what is outside it otherwise than through the appropriating assimilation of a negative image of it, and dissemination is written on the back - the *tain* - of that mirror.⁶²

Différance is that which allows identities to produce differences - and differences to produce identities - *ad infinitum*, endlessly disseminating a trace without origins, without ever taking part in the process. The tain of a mirror, Gasché tells us, "is the silver lining, the lustreless back of the mirror...without which no reflection and no specular and speculative activity would be possible, but which at the same time has no place and no part in reflection's scintillating play".⁶³ *Différance* is this tain - a movement which generates without participating, engenders without appearing. Derrida's cryptic mark which "alludes without breaking the glass, toward the *epekeina tes ousias*" now becomes clear: writing only ever alludes to, but never trespasses into the non-space beyond being, to the non-space behind the mirror. "God is a word" says Eckhart, "an unspoken word".⁶⁴ Whereas in Eckhart the nothingness beyond God is a realm of infinite possibility, one which chooses to manifest itself in the ground of the soul, a direct cause of the effect it brings

⁶¹ *Margins of Philosophy*, p3

⁶² *Dissemination*, p33

⁶³ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) p6

⁶⁴ Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p128

about...in Derrida, the nothingness of *différance* operates *indirectly* through the play of absences, an ancillary yet essential element in the generation of phenomena.

One may finally ask: what has this discussion of nothingness to do with our study of the uncertain in the texts of Eckhart and Derrida? The answer is simple: nothingness instigates uncertainty, nothingness makes uncertainty possible. *There is nothing behind the sign, nothing which could ever precede the sign*, nothing which would ever wholly determine how the sign should repeat itself, what signs it should provoke in response. It is the nothingness outside the text, beneath the text, which renders the text uncertain, which means that the text can never be safely anchored to a historical event, a biographical intention, a subconscious desire.

Analogously, for Eckhart, it is the nothingness of the Godhead which makes God uncertain, which means why "No-one can really say what God is".⁶⁵ Eckhart's God is like no other thing: He does not constitute a knowable entity whose actions one could predict and explain. There is nothing one can say about God which might determine His actions.

The aim in this section, therefore, has been to show how both concepts of the Godhead and *différance* are analogous manifestations of the uncertain, in response to the language of certainty used, for example, by affirmative theology and structuralism. By showing how both Eckhart and Derrida employ a different, more positive concept of nothingness, one which does not negate but generates, we move one step closer to our central tenet: that both writers, in their own ways, not only perform a critique of presence but also affirm and approve of the uncertainty which arises as a result of their efforts.

Objections.

The question of whether Eckhart's negative theology really does correspond to Derrida's appraisal of it - that is, whether the Godhead really is, in the end, just another superessentiality - will be examined in more depth in the final

⁶⁵Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p158, taken from the sermon *Homo quidam fecit*

chapter. All that is necessary for now is to note a) Derrida's objection to Eckhart's uncertainty as, ultimately, a transcendental version of a deferred certainty and b) the possibility of this judgment being based on one particular, 'orthodox' version of Eckhart, in ignorance of another.

While explaining to his "Japanese Friend" the necessity of having to "put aside all the traditional philosophical concepts, while reaffirming the necessity of returning to them", Derrida mentions how "this has been called, precipitously, a type of negative theology (this was neither true nor false but I shall not enter into the debate here)".⁶⁶ Derrida's attempts to disassociate himself from the God-saturated language of negative theology are interesting, partly because of what they tell us about Derrida's own ideas of Dionysius and Eckhart, and partly because of what they tell us about Derrida. Perhaps the most concentrated and explicit attempt to create some kind of distance between himself and the apophatic tradition occurs in *Margins of Philosophy*:

So much so that the detours, locutions and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate that *différance* is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable and ineffable mode of being. Such a development is not in question here, and this will be confirmed progressively. *Différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological - ontotheological - reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology - philosophy - produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.

Si bien que les détours, les périodes, la syntaxe auxquels je devrais souvent recourir, ressembleront, parfois à s'y méprendre, à ceux de la théologie négative. Déjà il a fallu marquer que la différence n'est pas, n'existe pas, n'est pas un étant-présent (on), quel qu'il soit: et nous serons amenés à marquer aussi

⁶⁶"Letter to a Japanese Friend" - taken from Peggy Kamuf (ed), *A Derrida Reader* (Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p273

*tout ce qu'elle n'est pas, c'est-à-dire tout: et par conséquent qu'elle n'a ni existence ni essence. Elle ne relève d'aucune catégorie de l'étant, qu'il soit présent ou absent. Et pourtant ce qui se marque ainsi de la différence n'est pas théologique, pas même de l'ordre le plus négatif de la théologie plus négative, celle-ci s'étant toujours affairée à dégager, comme on sait, une supra-essentialité par-delà les catégories finies de l'essence et de l'existence, c'est-à-dire de la présence, et s'empressant toujours de rappeler que si le prédicat de l'existence est refusé à Dieu, c'est pour lui reconnaître un mode d'être supérieur, inconcevable, ineffable. Il ne s'agit pas ici d'un tel mouvement et cela devrait se confirmer progressivement. La différence est non seulement irréductible à toute réappropriation ontologique ou théologique - onto-théologique - mais, ouvrant même l'espace dans lequel l'onto-théologie - la philosophie - produit son système et son histoire, elle la comprend, l'inscrit et l'excède sans retour.*⁶⁷

For Derrida, negative theology - "even the most negative of negative theologies" - is still a theology of presence. Its critique of presence is ultimately always teleological, in that it always sees such a critique as a means to an end - it dismantles theological presence on one level, only to reaffirm it on another. Its concern is not to challenge the notion of a 'superessentiality', but merely to remove it from the "finite" language of theologians and scholastics. To repeat the point more clearly in terms of our own project: Derrida's version of negative theology only affirms the *immediate* uncertainty of God, an uncertainty which arises from our own finite knowledge - or rather ignorance - of His hidden, unknowable essence. Therefore, as Derrida sees it, the God of the negative theologians is not fundamentally uncertain, but simply a hidden, elevated certainty rendered indeterminate through the act of mystification. Negative theology, as Schrödinger might have said, simply puts God back in the black box.

Derrida has already made this point in a similar passage in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics", with two minor differences. Firstly, whereas the above-cited passage is probably referring to Pseudo-Dionysius (the word 'superessentiality' 's most immediate echo is the Areopagite's *hyperousia*, 'beyond being'), Derrida's objection to negative theology in "Violence and Metaphysics" invokes two of Eckhart's sermons, *Nolite timere eos* and *Quasi stella matutina*, as representative of the negative stance. Secondly, the objection to Eckhart in the passage from

⁶⁷ *Margins of Philosophy*, p6, *Les Marges* 6

"Violence" seems slightly more guarded, as if the author were vaguely aware of the possibility of *another* Eckhart, to whom such objections might not be applicable:

"...When I said that God was not a Being but above Being, I did not thereby contest his Being, but on the contrary attributed to him *a more elevated Being*." (*Quasi stella*). This negative theology is still a theology and, in its literality at least, it is concerned with liberating and acknowledging the ineffable transcendence of an infinite existent...

"Quand j'ai dit que Dieu n'était pas un être et était au-dessus de l'être, je ne lui ai pas par là contesté l'être, au contraire le lui ai attribué un être plus élevé" (*Quasi stella matutina*) "Cette théologie négative est encore une théologie et, dans sa lettre du moins, il s'agit pour elle de libérer et de reconnaître la transcendance ineffable d'un étant infini..."⁶⁸

Literality? Does this mean that Eckhart's words, understood 'less' literally, might actually escape Derrida's dismissal of negative theology as just another transcendental signified? That a figurative interpretation of Eckhart's words might not necessarily constitute the disengagement of a familiar 'superessentiality' from finite logic and language?

Hart has already pointed out that Derrida's version of negative theology "assumes the *Thomist* reading of Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Hegelian* reading of Eckhart".⁶⁹ Readings which understood negative theology as simply a corrective "part of a dialectic with positive theology". This is, after all, how Aquinas makes use of Dionysius in his discussion on the names of God (see his *Summa Theologiae*, Question XIII, Second Article).⁷⁰ Hart sees Derrida as having understood Dionysius' *hyperousia*, following Rolt's translation, as 'above being', rather than in Levinas' terms - "otherwise than being".⁷¹ A similar case might be made for Eckhart and his reversal of Aquinas' "God is Being" (*deus est suum esse*) - "Being is God" (*esse est deus*). Eckhart, far from trying to correct affirmative theology, might well be seen as departing from it altogether. The *via negativa* in Eckhart - instead of returning once more to a deferred "superessentiality", the God

⁶⁸ *Writing and Difference* p146, *L'Écriture* 217

⁶⁹ Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p193

⁷⁰ Hyman & Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* p490

⁷¹ Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p202

of affirmative theology, on a sublated, *aufgehoben* level - veers off on its own into the unfathomable Godhead, to wander where it will, blissfully errant.

2.1.3 Summary: The Affirmation of Uncertainty.

Having examined the respective contexts of negative theology and deconstruction, the alleged 'common ground' of their terminology, their parallel conceptions of nothingness and, of course, Derrida's own objections to the label of 'negative theologian', it would be difficult to maintain that both writers are concerned with the same kind of 'uncertainty'. Both Eckhart's God and Derrida's text - an analogy we have already developed at some length - are elusive, ungovernable, resistant to explanation, but for different reasons. Eckhart's uncertainty stems from a finite incapacity to embrace an infinite store of significations; in other words, an uncertainty deriving from an absence of knowledge. The *incertitude* of Derrida's text, however, has a different 'source': "If polysemy is infinite, if it cannot be mastered as such, this is not because a finite reading or a finite writing remains incapable of exhausting a superabundance of meaning".⁷² Rather, one cannot speak with certainty about the text because of the play going on within its finite parameters, a play which always exceeds whatever structure one tries to impose upon the text, in order to have the final word on what the text is trying to *say*. This absence of certainty is clearly not a question of knowledge - even if one knew *all* the variables and *all* the constants, one could still not predict their play. This distinction between the uncertainties of Eckhart and Derrida is rendered most eloquently by Clive Hart: "As with some questions of modern physical theory, it is not that we could know but don't; it is rather that the information, the certainty, that we are seeking does not exist".⁷³

⁷²*Dissemination*, p253, 285

⁷³cit in Philip Herring, *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987) xii

The dissimilarity in these two versions of uncertainty, however, is not so great as to deny a powerful similarity in their consequences: an antipathy towards claims of certainty, an affirmation of errancy, a reluctance to name and classify and, above all, not just a *refusal* by both Derrida and Eckhart to lament their respective states of uncertainty, but the declaration that this is the ideal state in which to be:

If you wish to know God in a divine manner, then your knowing must become a pure unknowing...

Now you could say: but sir, what is there left for my reason to do if it stands entirely bare and wholly inactive? Is this the best way, if I raise my mind to an unknowing knowing, which cannot ever exist?...Should I stand in complete darkness?

Yes indeed! You are never better placed than when you are in complete darkness and unknowing.⁷⁴

Uncertainty, by no means the regrettable anxiety described by Descartes, is seen here as a necessary prelude to a 'knowledge' of God. Uncertainty means to dispense with certainties, to empty oneself of preconceptions, to create a 'clearing' in oneself in which God can become manifest. Eckhart goes on to call this darkness "potential receptivity"⁷⁵, which does give a clear indicator of what Eckhart feels uncertainty to be: an opening up towards God, who himself is "free and untrammelled in all his actions" and does everything "gladly and gratuitously".⁷⁶ For Eckhart, certainty would be the death of spontaneity, the curtailment of God's energy.

Derrida's own affirmation of uncertainty begins with a call to abandon the desire for certainty, a desire which "dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign" (*rêve de déchiffrer une vérité ou une origine échappant au jeu et à l'ordre du signe*)⁷⁷ - a phrase which, as we have seen, evokes Rousset just as much as Rousseau. Such a desire to escape the instability of language and find out what the sign originally meant will always see play as an obstacle, an impediment, as something problematic. Derrida does not see why one should seek the "lost or impossible presence of the absent origin" - the

⁷⁴Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p224 - from the sermon *Et cum factus esset Jesus*

⁷⁵ *ibid*, p224

⁷⁶Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p128

play which lovers of certainty find so problematic should be celebrated, not resented, in one "Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world".⁷⁸ There seems to be something liberating about uncertainty for Derrida - a shaking off of nostalgia and guilt, a refusal to recognise nothingness as an absence or lack. Just as Eckhart calls on the believer to abandon his conceptions of God, his desire to name or define Him, similarly Derrida exhorts the interpreter to abandon his truths, his goals, his desire to control the text and surrender himself to "the seminal adventure of the trace".⁷⁹

Derrida, in this well-known passage from the end of "Structure, Sign and Play" never states explicitly why we should *affirm* uncertainty rather than work towards its banishment; the word-choice he employs to describe the two "interpretations of interpretation" - the "saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic" path, as opposed to Nietzsche's "joyous", "active" affirmation - does imply what one might almost term an *aesthetic* dissatisfaction with certainty, a desire for freedom, spontaneity and "adventure". In both writers' analogous affirmations of the uncertain, a definite antipathy towards closure can be detected, a resistance towards the kind of narrow path which the language of certainty forces us to tread. Nevertheless, as has already been said, this aversion towards 'closure' will always have different meanings in Eckhart and Derrida. For Eckhart, it is our uncertainty about God which renders language fallible; the no-thingness of God which constantly undermines the project of language. For Derrida the idea is reversed: it is the uncertainty within language itself which undermines any discourse we try to make about God, the text, the world ...if Eckhartian uncertainty is the consequence of an "inarticulable presence"⁸⁰, then Derridean uncertainty springs from an ineluctable absence, an absence which is always already within the text.

⁷⁷ *Writing and Difference*, p292, *L'Écriture* 427

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p292

⁷⁹ *ibid*, p292

⁸⁰ the phrase is Spivak's, in her introduction to *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) page xv

2.2 The Elusiveness of Presence in *The Homecoming* : Pinter's Way and the *Via Negativa*

A language...where under what is said, another thing is being said...
The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place...

- Pinter in his lecture 'Writing for the Theatre'¹

Pinter's language constitutes a mocking of presence: intentions are declared, ironised, painfully re-evoked to be undermined once more. In darkened living rooms, sombre faces make strange noises to one another, sentences, clichés, everyday remarks whose 'meanings' oscillate relentlessly between various points of possibility, never resting for a moment to reassure us. Cosy, familiar registers of language are employed in bizarre contexts: likewise, alien, *unheimlich* exchanges occur in the middle of perfectly 'normal' dialogues. And throughout all of this, silence wells up and spills out onto the stage, saturating everything with pure possibility, unsettling even our most minimal convictions about the play, echoing, mocking, negating.

Of course, this has all been said before. Words such as 'uncertain', 'mystification', 'possibility', 'unpredictable' occur so often in Pinter criticism that they are rapidly becoming synonyms for that notorious adjective 'Pinteresque'. Stevenson writes about the "mysteriousness which cannot wholly be explained"², John Russell Brown comments on the "fleeting and uncertain opportunities for understanding"³. Kennedy concerns himself with human indeterminacy in Pinter⁴, Almansi with the latent mendacity in his characters' speech, Kristin Morrison with "the continual blend of the banal and the bizarre"⁵, whereas John Fuegi, in his gloomy address to a Tallahassee conference entitled "Pinter and the Uncertainty Principle", sees both Pinter and Beckett as the only postmodern hope in a theatre still

¹cit in Randall Stevenson, "Harold Pinter – Innovator?" in Alan Bold(ed), *Harold Pinter: You Never Heard Such Silence* (London: Vision Press, 1984) p32

²Alan Bold(ed), *Harold Pinter*, p38

³ John Russell Brown, *Theatre Language: A Study of Arden, Osborne, Pinter and Wesker* (London : Allen Lane, 1972) p22

⁴Andrew Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp165-178

⁵Kristin Morrison, *Canter and Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) p182



living in the predictable world of classical physics, which “presupposes the possibility of clarification and of reaching a solution”.⁶

The purpose of this section is also to investigate uncertainty in Pinter - the uncertainty of presence - but with a different aim in mind than those of previous critics, and from a radically different perspective. We would like to examine what the word ‘uncertainty’ means in Pinter as opposed to its usage in Eckhart and Derrida, how it is produced, where it leads us to, what feelings it arouses in its audience. The linking motif in both parts of this section is the critique of presence, an exposition of the illusion of presence which Pinter, as neither philosopher nor preacher, does not have to theorize about, but only *show*. All three figures in this study perform a critique of presence, with different intentions: this examination of *The Homecoming* would like to propose that, whereas Eckhart’s critique leads us to a nameless God beyond God, and Derrida’s investigations to “the joyful affirmation of the play of the world”⁷, Pinter’s own *via negativa* is a *via* which ultimately leads us nowhere.

Whether this, in turn, means that Pinter’s characters are nothing more than an array of guilty, Rousseauistic stooges, victims of a nostalgia, a yearning for an absolute which will be forever denied to them, is a question which we will have to answer later on. One could imagine a reading in which Pinter’s texts, in a curious way, enact the negative possibilities of Derrida’s project by portraying what happens when people refuse to affirm the play of the world and constantly - tragically - seek assurance from the unstable signs around them...

But we are running ahead of ourselves. For now, the aim of this study is to underline the uncertainty which manifests itself everywhere in *The Homecoming*, disrupting the harmony of the play by suggesting - but never imposing - one or more darker interpretations of a certain gesture, whilst leaving the gesture itself intact. The title of the play is an example of this; its uncertainty hinges upon the ambiguity of the word ‘home’ in English, the difference between saying “I am at home” and “I feel at home”. Is the home in *The Homecoming* simply a topographical reference - the postal address whose building Teddy physically dwelled in up to the age of sixteen?

⁶found in Steve Gale(ed), *Harold Pinter: Critical Approaches* (London: Associated University Press, 1986) p206

⁷ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p292

Or was - is - Teddy's home not just a *Haus* but also a *Heimat*, a collection of people who nurture warmth and love for him? "They're very warm people, really," he assures Ruth on their arrival, "They're not ogres".⁸ Teddy's father, Max, is equally fond of evoking this image of a cosy family nest. "Well, it's a long time since the whole family was together, eh? If only your mother was alive." (61) Barely three minutes later, Max suddenly seems to be re-assessing his home in a slightly more negative fashion: "A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slutbitch of a wife...and here I've got a lazy idle bugger of a brother won't even get to work on time." (63) The contradictions disconcert, startle, daze: which version is correct? Is Teddy's home simply an uneasy nest of criminally inclined sociopaths, forever lapsing into golden-days recollections and bizarre affectations of warmth? Or is it a 'home' whose members really do feel genuine affection for one another (Max consoling Joey, Teddy agreeing to cuddle his father, Sam and his desire to please Teddy), an affection repeatedly thwarted by the kind of family disputes which, although unusual, are by no means abnormal?

There is no denying that Teddy has come home: it is the kind of 'home' he has returned to which is in doubt. The uncertainty of the title accounts for much of the play's strangeness, as it expresses the increasing diffidence with which the audience greets every remark and gesture of brotherly love or fatherly pride, expressions which silently invoke their inverse as soon as the words leave the actors' mouths.

"Whatever we say of God is not true," says St Augustine, "and whatever we do not say of Him is true".⁹ The strangeness of *The Homecoming* lies in the fact that neither the affirmation nor the negation of the character's assertions seems very clear: the audience is left to oscillate between the two in a kind of *circolo negativo*.

Before going on to examine these basic ideas in more depth, some attention should be paid to the critical heritage of *The Homecoming*. Mention has just been made of the play's 'strangeness': in order to develop some of the ideas arising from this proposition, we will first have to deal with certain readings of *The Homecoming*

⁸p39. All textual references will be to the Methuen edition of *The Homecoming* in *Pinter: Plays Three* (London: Methuen, 1978)

⁹ cit. in Clarke, *Meister Eckhart*, p159

which insist that the play is not strange at all, but simply a rational working-out of a certain series of social circumstances.

2.2.1 The Critical Background: Rationalising Pinter.

One of the first things that becomes clear on reading the varied critical reactions to *The Homecoming* is not just the impression that no-one actually agrees on what the play means, but that there is a deep division between those who feel that the play means something, and those who cannot imagine how the play could mean *anything*. Stevenson suggests how six decades' ignorance of European modernism may largely explain the Anglo-Saxon sense of baffled curiosity and vague resentment which colours the prose of so many of Pinter's less sympathetic critics - "feeling cheated", as the *Guardian* called it.¹⁰ Among those who cannot - or will not - totalize the play to produce a single, explicable, coherent interpretation, the camp divides once more into those who lament the fact and those who feel such enigma provides one of the real sources of the play's undeniable power.

"Perfectly turned - but to what end?"¹¹ asked Philip Hope Wallace in the *Guardian* in 1965. The sense that something both puzzling and remarkable had been produced, but that it concerned a remarkableness which neither playwright nor critic could say they really understood, is a prevalent reaction to Pinter, invariably accompanied by lamentations of incompleteness, unbalance and dissatisfaction. The unpredictable actions of certain characters in *The Homecoming* also draws accusations of bad plotting and inconsistency. For Trussler, Ruth's "change of heart at the peripeteia of action" is "sudden and lacking in conviction, unbalancing the whole play".¹² Others, such as Morrison, see the ambiguity and bizarreness of the play as one of its major assets. For Hinchcliffe, "Lenny remains the enigmatic centre

¹⁰ see Randall Stevenson, "Harold Pinter - Innovator?" in Alan Bold (ed), *Harold Pinter: You Never Heard Such Silence* (London: Vision Press, 1984) p29

¹¹ Michael Scott(ed), *Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming* (London: Macmillan Casebook Series, 1986) p198

¹² Simon Trussler *The Plays of Harold Pinter* (London : Gollancz, 1973) p128

of the play”¹³, an undecidable, unpredictable sign whose movement is “neither free nor lost”. Indeed, undecidability may well be the central motif of Hinchcliffe’s reading - “All the rich sentiments of family affection ...are contradicted, ironic, phony or all three”.(162).

Working against this current, a number of critics have insisted that “the play is not puzzling at all” (as John Elsom wrote in the *Listener*) but, on the contrary, quite rational and comprehensible.¹⁴ Such a movement in criticism of *The Homecoming* was reinforced by Billington’s ‘naturalistic’ production in 1978, where the familiar characteristics of “Pinter’s distinctive style - the long, ambiguous pauses, the hints of distant menace”¹⁵ were played down to emphasise the power struggles going on between the characters. It is therefore of no surprise that most of the ‘rational’ interpretations of *The Homecoming* - that is, interpretations which insist on the coherence and meaningfulness of the play as a *whole* - inevitably make use of the various tensions and conflicts present in the fabric of the script. Two such readings, those of Esslin and Wardle, supply us with two very different ideas of the play: a socio-biological reading, in which the behaviour of the characters is seen as analogous to the behaviour of animals in defending /attacking one another’s territory and a ‘realistic’ reading, which posits a series of credible explanations for the characters’ ‘inexplicable’ actions and contests the view that *The Homecoming* is at all ‘unconvincing’. We shall now consider these readings in a little more depth.

The object of this brief discussion is not to claim that the two interpretations are ‘wrong’, but simply that their approaches exhibit two characteristics which, as we shall see, will prove to be of fundamental importance to our own study of uncertainty: i) a desire to make explicable - to *ascertain* - the causes and motivations of *The Homecoming*’s characters and ii) an implicit though often selective trust not only in the veracity of the characters’ assertions but also in the general stability of language. Both Esslin and Wardle are accomplished critics and their interpretations make convincing reading. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to feel the subject of some

¹³Arnold Hinchcliffe, *Harold Pinter*(Boston: Twayne, 1967) p162

¹⁴Scott (ed), Macmillan Casebook, p198

¹⁵ *ibid*, p198

kind of Enlightenment project when moving through their works: the mystery of *The Homecoming* is finally exposed, and all those ridiculous myths about its characters' "apparently inexplicable motivations", indeed the "incredible" nature of the entire story, are finally banished.¹⁶ Wardle, especially, insists on having discerned the incontestable truth of Pinter's play, a truth which is obvious enough to anyone who happens to have read Desmond Morris' *The Naked Ape* :

...all Pinter had done was to remove the conventional mask and show the naked animal. The play, as a result, has to be understood in territorial terms or not at all.¹⁷

Wardle's reliance on socio-biology in his reading of *The Homecoming* does, in a literary dimension, render him vulnerable to the same charges of reductionism that have already been leveled at Morris, Eibl-Eiblsfeldt and Lorenz. In his essay "The Territorial Struggle", the motives and meaning for every line of the play, every gesture made and remark uttered, are ultimately brought back to reinforce a single principle: "territorial aspiration".¹⁸ Ruth's self-prostitution is seen as a bargained contract, sex in return for property, her actions rendered explicable by the 'fact' that when "a female passes out of a male stamping ground, she cancels her bond with him." This, for Wardle, is precisely - incontestably - why Ruth's love "goes to the male who owns the best piece of property".¹⁹ Wardle seems to forget the play's final image, where an indifferent Ruth strokes Joey's head and stares into space as Max, gasping and wheezing at her side, desperately tries to obtain her attention. The various arguments and conflicts within the play are also seen as "status battles"²⁰, the effects of a "power contest" within a "family of predators".²¹ Little in Wardle's reading of *The Homecoming* is left to chance, from Max's bullying of his younger brother Sam - which he interprets as a display of "proprietary authority" - to Lenny's attempts to provoke a philosophical discussion with Teddy, attempts which Wardle sees as being ultimately "territorial" in their motivations.

¹⁶Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound* (London: Methuen, 1970) p149

¹⁷Scott (ed), Macmillan Casebook, p169

¹⁸ibid p169

¹⁹ ibid, p170

²⁰ibid p 170 for all three quotations

²¹ibid p169

Wardle calls *The Homecoming* "a very ironic play",²² and yet the space for irony he leaves within his own reading of the text would not allow for a multitude of senses. The suggestion which Almansi has raised - that every member of a Pinter cast is a compulsive and pathological liar from beginning to end, indeed the possibility that many of the characters' assertions which Wardle draws on to form his own hypotheses and underline his own points may equally be true or untrue - does not seem to unduly worry Wardle, although he is not unaware of the problem. In affirming Max's role as the "hunter" in reference to his old job as a butcher, Wardle remarks in parentheses:

Immediately we are on thin ice. Pinter always destroys things by explicit reference; nobody's word is to be trusted. But as nobody challenges Max's statements about his past, it's fair to take them as more than a mere strategic fantasy.²³

Wardle performs two gestures here: first of all, by speculating upon whether Max really had been a butcher or not, he embarks upon what one critic has called the "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" school of criticism²⁴, an endless hypothesizing about the ultimately unverifiable. In effect, he displays a belief in the *presence* of a single intent behind Max's words as he utters them at that point in the play, an intent we can stumble upon only if we study the play carefully enough. Secondly, the curious method Wardle proffers of testing the truth-claims we hear within the play - 'If no-one disagrees with a statement, then it is probably true' - relies upon the implicit truthfulness and honesty of all the other characters. If a compulsive liar such as Lenny had challenged Max's claims to being a butcher - what then? And what about all the other statements in *The Homecoming* which Wardle recognises are untrue (such as Ruth's "probably untrustworthy assertion" that she was born nearby²⁵) but which are never challenged?

This is by no means to say that Wardle is gullible: he displays a mistrust towards the speeches in *The Homecoming*, but it is a selective mistrust, a mistrust

²² *ibid*, p171

²³ *ibid*, p169

²⁴ *ibid* p12

²⁵ *ibid* p170

employed only when a negation of what the character has said would reinforce Wardle's own reading. His assertion, for example, that "Teddy is a complete outsider" is wholly based on the fact that Lenny assures him he is part of the family. "Any reassurance from that mouth is bound to be untrue!".²⁶ That Teddy is an outsider in *The Homecoming* is by no means a wild and unjustifiable proposition - but to insist upon him being "a complete outsider", categorically and without any uncertainty, would involve denying or at least radically re-interpreting a number of problematic moments in the play: Max's offer of a "cuddle" at the end of Act One, the special relationship between Sam and Teddy, the strangely paternal remarks Max offers to Teddy throughout the play ("Well, how you been keeping, son?" 64), even the penultimate scene where Teddy is included in the "kitty" for the upkeep of Ruth as a prostitute. Again, it is not that Wardle's reading is 'wrong' or 'improbable' - it is that his assertions do not take into account the basic uncertainty within the play.

Esslin's reading of the play - though by no means anthropological - follows a similar course to that of Wardle's, displaying a similar desire to clarify, de-mystify, the meaning of the play, and consequently draws a number of similar criticisms. Esslin's basic assertion that *The Homecoming* "can...stand up to the most meticulous examination as a piece of realistic theatre" (172) invokes what some critics have considered to be a basically naive reading of the text. Like Wardle, Esslin provides an impressive series of explanations for Ruth's bizarre behaviour, involving an unhappy and sexually unfulfilling marital relationship, incurable nymphomania and a previous history of prostitution. Esslin presents them skillfully and in a way which does exhibit a strong sense of internal coherence, creatively reconstructing a picture of a broken down marriage from the snippets we are offered in *The Homecoming* - the sudden trip to Venice, Ruth's reluctance to go straight to bed, the mention of the college campus and Ruth's dissatisfaction with her new life in the New World.

In Esslin's reading of *The Homecoming*, no-one is ever actually accused of telling a lie; the closest we come to this is on page 150 of *The Peopled Wound*, where Esslin momentarily considers the possibility of Max's tales about his gangland past as being nothing more than "empty boasting". Otherwise, Esslin appears to believe

²⁶ibid p170

everything he reads/hears, even Lenny's monologues, which do seem to have an air of the theatrical about them, prompted as they are by the presence of a bemused yet curious female audience. Esslin's explication of *The Homecoming*, to quote Almansi/Henderson, constitutes an attempt to "satisfy a craving for comprehension"²⁷, a craving which formulates its certainties on the basis of an unquestioning acceptance of the play's speeches.

If Esslin here is the affirmative theologian *par excellence*, one who believes one can speak truthfully and meaningfully about *The Homecoming* in virtue of what its characters say, then Almansi, to a certain extent, represents the negative theologian: one can only speak truthfully about *The Homecoming* through what the characters do *not* say. This is a central theme to Almansi's reading; Pinter's characters embody dishonesty. "The Pinterian hero...grunts in order to hide something else".²⁸ Unlike Wardle, Almansi never gives his characters the benefit of the doubt. "You can trust his characters neither when they are talking to others nor when they are talking to themselves".²⁹ Almansi's critique of Esslin, as we have seen, lies in the fact that Esslin hardly ever seems to consider the possibility of the characters' mendacity. A picture is painted of a bumbling detective, naively swallowing every alibi offered to him. One could say, however, that Almansi - in his conviction that all Pinter characters are "conscientious and persistent liars" (20) - commits the inverted version of an identical error, by refusing to consider *a priori* the possibility that one character may actually be speaking the truth.

In this sense, through a repeated use of terms such as 'lie' and 'liar', Almansi's reading simply moves within the negative half of the same true/false dualism. To lie is to know the truth but say something different - if Almansi feels that Pinter's characters really do "hide the truth" (20) whenever they open their mouths, then there is indeed a truth about the play to be understood, even if this means arriving at the 'truth' through a *negation* of what the characters appear to be saying. The aim of the remainder of this chapter is to show why neither Esslin's *via*

²⁷Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, p72

²⁸Guido Almansi/ S.Henderson, *Harold Pinter* (London: Methuen,1983) p19

²⁹ibid, p20

affirmativa nor Almansi's *via negativa* can ever really be conclusive, as both readings still rely on an idea of presence in *The Homecoming*, a semantic stability which - as we shall see - simply cannot be obtained. What follows, therefore, is an examination of how uncertainty is produced in *The Homecoming* under two different headings: language and human relationships.

2.2.2 The Indeterminacy of Language

In attempting to write about language in *The Homecoming*, a very Derridean problem arises: when one refers to the play known as *The Homecoming* by Harold Pinter, what is being referred to? The written text, the film version or any one of the various productions one might have seen over the years? The problem is Derridean inasmuch that a reading of the script leaves a much greater impression of the play's essential ambiguity; a good production aiming for clarity with a determined director can - through the correct emphases and pauses - 'turn down' the uncertainty in the play to its irreducible minimum. A less forceful production with blander expressions, longer silences and speeches which are not conveniently inflected to make them more understandable, serves to widen the parameters of the play's possibilities and thereby rob it of one overriding perspective. To *read* the script of *The Homecoming* is to experience the play without any theatrical mediation - without anyone *present* to nudge a line a certain way, or lend a remark a destination with a certain glance or cadence.

The indeterminacy of language within *The Homecoming* manifests itself in two ways: repetition and irony. At a number of points throughout the play, words, commands or gestures are repeated, signs which change their meaning each time they are evoked and reflected upon. The most obvious example of this is the 'table episode' where Lenny, sitting with the family in the living room, starts to tease Teddy provocatively with a philosophical conundrum:

LENNY: ...In other words, apart from the known and the unknown, what else is there?

Pause.

TEDDY: I'm afraid I'm the wrong person to ask.

LENNY: But you're a philosopher. Come on, be frank. What do you make of all this business of being and non-being?

TEDDY: What do you make of it?

LENNY: Well, for instance, take a table. Philosophically speaking. What is it?

TEDDY: A table.

LENNY: Ah. You mean it's nothing else but a table. Well, some people would envy your certainty, wouldn't they, Joey? For instance, I've got a couple of friends of mine, we often sit round the Ritz Bar having a few liqueurs, and they're always saying things like that, you know, things like: Take a table, take it.

Alright, I say, *take* it, *take* a table, but once you've taken it, what you going to do with it? Once you've got hold of it, where you going to take it?

MAX: You'd probably sell it.

LENNY: You wouldn't get much for it.

JOEY: Chop it up for firewood.

Lenny looks at him and laughs.(68)

The scene can be played comically - Lenny's mischievous nod to Joey in the middle of his philosophising always makes an audience laugh - but far more important is how the 'table episode' invokes some of the underlying themes of the play: how do we understand things? Do signs really mean anything? Can we trust them not to change? For almost sixty seconds of stage-time, the audience's attention is directed upon the small coffee table around which the family are sitting. Throughout this minute, as soon as the word 'table' is *repeated*, interrogated, it acquires a bewildering number of meanings: from the simple stage prop which Ruth lays the tray upon to serve coffee to the rest of the family, it reveals itself to be an object of genuine philosophical curiosity for Lenny, an attempt to undermine the security of his own position for Teddy; for Max it represents a financial commodity, for Joey the pugilist (intellectually the most basic member of the group) simply something to physically break up and use as firewood. For the audience, the 'meaning' of the table suddenly becomes an issue: it shimmers and changes as the discussion ranges backwards and forwards across it. For a short period of time, the meaning of the word "table" becomes *indeterminate*. Lifted out of its familiar semantic niche by Lenny's provocative gesture, it oscillates for sixty seconds between a bewildering number of different contexts, before sliding back into its place at the sound of the family's laughter.

If the 'table episode' is indicative of anything, it shows how the repetition of signs in Pinter is never predictable, even when nothing more than a pause for breath separates the repetitions. Signs in *The Homecoming* are fundamentally indeterminate

for this reason - they are not anchored safely to an immutable, unchanging, *a priori* set of truths, one which they faithfully reflect whenever they are asked to do so. Even apparently 'purposeful' and 'clear' language such as commands and requests seem to take on odd, different meanings when repeated, as the first encounter between Ruth and Lenny (the infamous glass-of-water scene) clearly shows. It is midnight and Lenny has caught Ruth coming through the front door on the way back from a walk:

LENNY: And now perhaps I'll relieve you of your glass.

RUTH: I haven't quite finished.

LENNY: You've consumed quite enough, in my opinion.

RUTH: No, I haven't.

LENNY: Quite sufficient, in my own opinion.

RUTH: Not in mine, Leonard.

Pause.

LENNY: Don't call me that, please.

RUTH: Why not?

LENNY: That's the name my mother gave me.

Pause.

Just give me the glass.

RUTH: No.

Pause.

LENNY: I'll take it, then.

RUTH: If you take the glass, I'll take you.

Pause.

LENNY: How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

RUTH: Why don't I just take you?

Pause.

LENNY: You're joking. (50)

Ruth employs the indeterminacy of her own language upon Lenny to a crippling effect here, allowing the ambiguity of her response to accrue with each mocking repetition of the word "take", repetitions which serve to add a new meaning to the word each time it is repeated. The irony of Lenny's humiliation lies in the fact that this game of indeterminate meaning - which Lenny loses so badly - is a game which *he* has instigated. When Lenny proposes to "relieve" Ruth of her glass, he phrases the question as a policeman might, asking someone to hand over their weapon, which might explain Ruth's reluctance to do so. Or one might feel there is something implicitly sexual about Lenny's phrasing - to 'relieve' someone of a glass in the same way one might 'relieve' someone of a coat or garment. There is also the comic possibility that Lenny, by phrasing his proposition in such a way, is also mocking his sister-in-law's relative refinement and new social status, as he has already done

several times (his offer of an "aperitif" earlier, or - after her mention of the trip to "Dear old Venice", his mocking remark: "I decided to do a bit of snow clearing for the Borough Council, because we had a heavy snow over here that year in Europe" 48).

Like the word "table" in the earlier passage, the glass now becomes the new focus of attention, taking on several senses, none of which can be specifically determined as the *overriding* meaning. The glass becomes the barometer of a power struggle, a possible weapon of defence, a token sexual conquest, a means of subtle ridicule...whilst remaining still a glass. The repetition of the word "take" underlines this semantic splaying-open - when Ruth says: "If you take the glass, I'll take you", she plays enigmatically upon the violent/sexual senses of "take" without committing herself to a context which might betray one meaning or the other.

Ruth wins not only because she remains indeterminate, but because she manages to do so whilst *determining* "Leonard". By evoking the infantile label allotted to Lenny by his mother, Ruth effectively re-describes Lenny as a child, forcing him into a context, inserting him between parameters of certainty which Lenny clearly feels uncomfortable with. Lenny, on the other hand, is no longer able to perform any such operation upon Ruth, who is suddenly transformed from the passive audience of five minutes ago into a figure which is *either* a mocker *or* a seductress. His inability to determine her exact intentions ("What are you doing, making me some kind of proposal?" 50) only provokes her laughter. His uncertainty as to whether Ruth really is joking paralyses him, prevents him from being able to proceed with his game, not just because he no longer knows the rules, but also because he is no longer sure of who he is playing with.

The indeterminacy of language in *The Homecoming* also manifests itself through irony, even though this may not immediately seem to be the case. The dictionary definition of irony - saying one thing whilst intending the opposite meaning - seems to have little to do with the uncertainty of meaning and more to do with the inverse of a certain meaning we examined in the previous section, operations which lead us back to the *presence* of a particular, discernible intent

behind the characters' actions. What is of importance to us here, however, is not so much the ironic meaning of a certain line, but the *oscillation* of possibility between the intended meaning of a line and its irony. When one calls into question the presence of this determining, validating intent, something interesting happens to the play: 'irony' ceases to be a simple verbal tool and becomes, instead, an ever-present possibility. Who is to say which sentences in *The Homecoming* are ironic and which are not? No longer merely a means of ridicule and barely perceptible mockery, the ghost of irony grows to haunt each line of the play, be it serious or mocking, playful or naive.

There are two kinds of irony in *The Homecoming*: the obvious and the possible. 'Obvious' irony usually occurs under the guise of the innocent - a straightforward question or a bland remark - and is invariably malicious. When Sam tells of the American he drove to the airport, Lenny interjects good-naturedly: "Had to catch a plane there, did he?" (28). Lenny's irony, so obvious to the audience, is lost on Sam, who never appears to suspect his nephew's curiosity in his profession as being tainted with the slightest insincerity. "I bet the other drivers get jealous, don't they, Uncle?" (29). Lenny's ironic adoption of filial sincerity in his mockery of Max is always noticed, however. After having called his father a "dog cook" earlier on, Lenny says:

LENNY: What the boys want, Dad, is your own special brand of cooking, Dad. That's what the boys look forward to. The special understanding of food, you know, that you've got.
MAX: Stop calling me Dad. Just stop all that calling me Dad, do you understand? (33)

Ever aware of the contempt his son holds him in, Max's ears are always ready to determine the sly, unpleasant realities beneath his son's loving praises and good-natured advice. Max himself is not beyond irony, which he employs upon Sam to devastating effect. "It's funny you never got married, isn't it? A man with all your gifts" (30). And later: "When you find the right girl, Sam, let your family know...you can bring her to live here, she can keep us all happy. We'd take it in turns to give her a walk around the park"(31). Words which will acquire their own sense of irony later on in the play.

All the above examples are examples of obvious irony, examples which wring their effect by adopting a register or tone of language which the audience knows is incompatible with the 'true' feelings of the speaker. When Lenny praises his father's cuisine, the audience knows his words are ironic because, barely five minutes earlier, he had compared Max's cooking to dog food. Instead of banally repeating this to offend Max another time, Lenny employs the vocabulary of idolizing-son-wishing-to-please-his-father to reiterate something which is - we feel - clearly untrue. This highlights the problem of establishing where irony takes place in *The Homecoming*: in a play so wrought with ambiguity, unpredictable characters, unreliable testimonies and some frankly bizarre statements (Teddy explaining the plan of the house to Ruth: "The structure wasn't affected, you see. My mother was dead." 37), one has to be *certain* about the intentions of the characters before embarking upon any speculations concerning the irony of their statements.

There are, indeed, a number of moments of 'possible irony' in *The Homecoming*: that is, moments where it is radically uncertain whether a particular line is ironic or not. A line may be potentially ironic - to arrive at any kind of conclusion, however, would necessitate a series of assumptions concerning the speaker's attitude towards the addressee, assumptions which are by no means incontestable. Two such examples will suffice to show this, the first being Max's indignant remark at the end of Act One, upon having Ruth presented to him at breakfast:

MAX: ...we've had a stinking, pox-ridden slut in my house all night.

TEDDY: Stop it! What are you talking about?

MAX: I haven't seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street, he shacks up in my house!

TEDDY: She's my wife ! We're married!

Pause.

MAX: *I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died.* (p58 - italics mine).

Either the grammatical ambiguity of Max's remark is genuinely careless - and therefore he does not consider his wife to have been the last "whore" to have slept in the house - or the old man is deliberately playing with words because, deep down, he really *did* feel his wife was a "whore". The two alternatives are equally plausible, reflecting as they do something fundamentally ambiguous in Max's own feelings

towards Jessie - "Mind you, she wasn't such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her stinking, rotten face, she wasn't such a bad bitch" (25). In order to establish once and for all whether Max's remark does contain an unwanted irony, one would somehow have to determine whether Max 'really' thought his wife was a "whore" - or indeed, if she ever did anything which in his view might merit the term. This would mean asking questions such as: was Sam's revelation that "Macregor had Jessie in the back" of his cab really true? Is Max's description of his wife in Act Two - "a woman...with a will of iron, a heart of gold and a mind" genuine or simply a ruse to reassure Ruth?

Clearly, we are back in the land of 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?'. Ruth's valedictory remark to Teddy as he leaves the house presents the would-be seeker of certainties with a similar series of problems:

LENNY: Ta-ta, Ted. Good to see you. Have a good trip.

TEDDY: Bye-bye, Joey.

Joey does not move.

JOEY: Ta-ta.

Teddy goes to the front door.

RUTH: Eddie.

Teddy turns.

Pause.

Don't become a stranger.

Teddy goes, shuts the front door. (p96)

The remark is so strange that it often provokes laughter: actors have been unsure whether to portray Teddy's reaction, suitcases in both hands, as puzzled (as in Roger Michell's 1997 production at the National) or simply unflinching and indifferent (as in Peter Hall's film adaptation). It is an uncertainty which reflects, as in Max's remark, the fundamental ambiguity of the sentence. The fact that Ruth addresses him as Eddie may suggest the sincerity of the line - although, as one critic has already pointed out³⁰, Ruth may also be mocking him in the same way she mocked "Leonard", by refusing to address him by his preferred name. Therefore the 'possible irony' of Ruth's farewell depends on whether she bears any malice or resentment towards her husband, and whether this malice is actually expressed at that moment in asking Teddy sarcastically not to alienate himself from the family. A cruel parody of

³⁰Scott(ed), Macmillan Casebook, p14

uxorial affection or a genuine lapse into the kind of sentiments which - possibly - both Teddy and Ruth felt for one another in the days before their marriage went wrong? The remark remains uncertain - even if one does make a certain choice, electing one interpretation of Ruth's words over another, the chosen interpretation will always be haunted by its ghostly inverse, by the inescapable possibility that an irony has just been uttered.

2.2.3 The Indeterminacy of Human Relationships.

It is not difficult to see how the indeterminacy of language is implicated in the indeterminacy of human relationships within *The Homecoming*; if we understand the meaning of a remark by its intention, then the hope of obtaining such a meaning quickly becomes indeterminable in a play where characters can display such curious reticence, behave unpredictably and speak a language which is so hermeneutically elastic. Of course, there are other factors which contribute towards such 'hermeneutic elasticity' - the bizarre interspersing of linguistic registers, for example (philosophical discussions in the middle of family chats, stereotypically affectionate father-son conversations going on while the daughter-in-law is rolling about on the floor with the rest of the family, Lenny interspersing his strange, violent anecdotes to Ruth with surreal hospitality). In his conference address "The Uncertainty Principle", Fuegi has already written on how Pinter's characters have "the randomness of particles in the post-Heisenbergian world view".³¹ What this section proposes is that the undecidable ambiguity of language in *The Homecoming* is a direct consequence of the instability of the relationships within the play.

As we maintained at the very beginning of this section, it is an instability which forever oscillates between two positions. Elements of the play which purvey an impression of traditional, patriarchal, homely life (Teddy wanting to see his old bedroom upon his arrival, the family chat, Max's recollection of golden family moments), elements which almost betray some sense of affection between the members of Teddy's family, are juxtaposed in a surreal way between scenes and

³¹Gale, *Harold Pinter: Critical Approaches*, p205

speeches which give a diametrically opposite impression (Max's initial abuse of Ruth, the violent quarrels between Max and Lenny, the antagonism between Max and Sam, the family orgies and the quarrel about who is going to have the most sex with Teddy's wife). For this reason, *The Homecoming* operates through a kind of dramatic schizophrenia - one is never quite sure whether one is watching a play about a group of vicious, sex-starved sociopaths or an East End version of *The Waltons*.

Given this constant oscillation between the two faces of *The Homecoming*, this might be an opportune moment to mention Schrödinger, and take on board a metaphor which shall prove useful to us in our investigations. For those unfamiliar with the hypothesis, Schrödinger's cat was a famous attempt to illustrate how two different waveforms might overlap and interfere with one another. A cat is placed in a closed box along with a small source of radiation, a geiger counter and a small phial of cyanide with a hammer poised above it. If, after a certain amount of time, a stray alpha particle is detected by the geiger counter, the hammer falls, the flask of cyanide is broken and the cat dies. Davies (1992) goes on:

One can therefore envisage two possibilities. In one case the atom decays, the hammer falls and the cat is dead. In the other case, which has equal probability, none of this happens and the cat remains alive. The quantum wave must incorporate all possibilities, so the correct quantum description of the contents of the box must consist of two overlapping and interfering waveforms, one corresponding to a live cat, the other to a dead cat. In this ghostly hybrid state, the cat cannot be regarded as definitely either dead or alive...It is as if nature suspends judgment on the fate of the poor creature *until somebody peeks*. (Italics mine).³²

Until we open the box, the fate of the cat is uncertain: it is, in a strange way, both dead and alive. Such quantum uncertainty, I would like to suggest, exists in *The Homecoming* in abundance: the only difference is that we cannot lift off the tops of the characters' heads and 'peek' inside to find out their intentions, because there are none to evaluate. All we have is a text. Did Max really call Ruth a "pox-ridden slut"? Is Ruth really mocking Teddy when she says goodbye? Can Lenny's anecdotes really be trusted? Did Macregor really have Jessie in the back of Sam's cab? Did Teddy really think his family are not ogres? Like the cat in Schrödinger's box, Pinter's characters occupy an uncanny kind of quantum space - one in which, contrary to the

speculations of Esslin and Almansi, a definite answer to any of the above questions is simply unavailable.

Let's take, for example, the figure of Max - would it be possible to talk with any consistency and certainty about his feelings towards those around him? Is he an "ogre" or just "a confused old man" (58), as Joey explains? At the end of Act One, the audience witnesses his extraordinary attack on both Teddy and Ruth ("Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into the house?" 57) and his order to Joey to "chuck them out". This is almost immediately followed by Max's request for Teddy to embrace him - "Teddy, why don't we have a nice cuddle and a kiss, eh? Like the old days?" (59). And Teddy does indeed embrace him - which convinces us either that the preceding three minutes of stage time has all been an elaborate joke, of such an intimacy that only Teddy and his father can really understand, or that Teddy has decided to play along with the unpredictable, Protean nature of the old man's derangement.

The uncertainty persists in the beginning of the next act, the scene of the family lunch. Max is sitting next to his daughter-in-law, the "stinking pox-ridden slut" and "dirty tart" of the previous scene. Max lights his cigar after a good meal and says to her:

Well, it's a long time since the whole family was together, eh? If only your mother was alive. Eh, what do you say, Sam? What would Jessie say if she was alive? Sitting here with her three sons. Three fine grown-up lads. And a lovely daughter-in-law. The only shame is her grandchildren aren't here. She'd have petted and cooed over them, wouldn't she Sam? ... Mind you, she taught those boys everything they know. She taught them all the morality they know. (62)

Of course, Almansi - Pinter's negative theologian - would say that Max is lying through his teeth here. To consider the possible sincerity in Max's words would be ridiculous - "three fine grown-up lads"? a "lovely daughter-in-law"? After a scene in which Max has punched Joey in the stomach, spat in Lenny's face and called Teddy's wife a "disease", Pinter is surely being ironic. Equally, Esslin - Pinter's affirmative theologian - would probably suggest the opposite. Given Esslin's (justifiable) conviction of the gangland background of Max's family, not to mention the proposition that Lenny is very probably a pimp, Max may well be telling the truth

³² Paul Davies, *The Matter Myth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) p211-212

when he says how Jessie taught her sons “all the morality they know”. Perhaps Jessie - the hypothetical “whore” in Max’s ambiguous solecism - really did teach her children all they know.

The obstacle to any conclusive remarks concerning Max’s lapse into nostalgia is that, regardless of whether the irony is intended or not, there is no way of knowing whether Max really ‘means what he says’. If one sees the desire to impress Ruth and create the facade of a happy family atmosphere as a motivation for producing such a pack of lies, then one has to explain similar moments in the play when Max lapses into some nostalgic thought-train, but without any audience he is particularly keen to impress. “Our father!” he says in front of Sam. “I remember him...I was only that big...he’d dandle me. Give me a bottle. Wipe me clean. Give me a smile. Pat me on the bum. ...I remember my father.” (35) Max is quite capable of sentimentalising his past *ex tempore* - one hardly needs the presence of a cynical motive to provoke him.

Any attempt to reduce Max’s behaviour to one simplistic set of adjectives such as ‘malicious’, ‘cruel’, ‘violent’ is flawed by the contradictory moments of paternal affection and human feeling which are interspersed throughout the play. His offer to take Joey to the football match and his protective feelings towards him (“You been shouting at Joey?” he demands to know from Lenny), his cuddle with Teddy, his alarm in the night at Lenny’s cries (“He wakes me up in the middle of the night, I think we got burglars here, I think he ‘s got a knife stuck in him, I come down here, he tells me to pop off” 31)...all of this provides a ghostly counter-image of Max, one which complicates and renders problematic a ‘straightforward’ reading of the play. The critic Dukore (1982), perceiving this difference between what characters in *The Homecoming* purport to be and how they actually behave, writes:

The play disorients. A butcher cooks what one of his sons calls dog food. A young fighter is knocked to the ground by his old father. A philosopher refuses to philosophise. A chauffeur is unable to drive. A pimp takes orders from his whore. The whore does not go all the way with a man.³³

The word ‘disorients’ is appropriate: signs such as ‘father’, ‘wife’, ‘brother’ indicate one direction, whilst what we actually see and hear on stage sends us in the other. Pinter’s

³³Scott, Macmillan Casebook p190

characters present us with possibilities which are ultimately undecidable - as in the case of Max or Ruth, if we choose to interpret the signs one way, there is always a problematic residue which de-stabilises the reading. Suspected lies are always haunted by the possibility of their truth; apparently sincere remarks never quite escape the shadow of irony which seems to fall over the entire play. Such linguistic indeterminacy seems to lie at the heart of Pinter's script, producing an uncertainty which - as we shall see - will be of a radically different kind from that of *The Birthday Party* or *The Dumb Waiter*.

2.2.4 The Frustration of the Uncertain: One Possible Reading

Having examined some of the ways in which the text of *The Homecoming* produces uncertainty, generating a finite number of indeterminate readings, this final section aims to explore the attitude towards uncertainty exhibited by the other characters within the play. In the first part of this section, we saw how the various contradictions and ambiguities within *The Homecoming* thwarted any attempt at a single, definitive, internally coherent reading of the play. What this final section will now do will be to suggest a reading of the play which appropriates *The Homecoming* purely from the perspective of our own investigations - namely, the effects which the uncertain and the desire for certainty has upon the other characters. Such a thematic treatment will serve to elucidate, I hope, the main point of this section: that whereas in the texts of Eckhart and Derrida, the uncertainty of presence (however differently understood) is seen as a liberating and productive concept, for most of the characters in *The Homecoming* it is primarily negative, aggressive and, above all, frustrating.

Noel Coward, in his oft-quoted praise of Pinter, talks about words which are both "unexpected and violent"³⁴, a pairing of adjectives which would apply just as well to *The Homecoming* as *The Birthday Party* or *The Caretaker*. Uncertainty has a sinister and unsettling side in *The Homecoming* which manifests itself through sudden bouts of violence, ambiguous threats, a startlingly open act of marital unfaithfulness and several uncertain accounts of physical brutality whose veracity is

³⁴ Coward, *The Sunday Times*, 15 Jan 1961, cit. in Christopher Innes' *Modern British Drama*

difficult to gauge. Consider Lenny, who is relating to Ruth the story of his encounter with "a certain lady" who "is falling apart with the pox":

LENNY: Well, to sum up, everything was in my favour, for a killing...But...in the end I thought...Aaaah, why go to all the bother...So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that.

RUTH: How did you know she was diseased?

LENNY: How did I know that?

Pause.

I decided she was.

Pause.

You and my brother are newly-weds, are you? (47)

The intention of the anecdote is unclear, its relevance mysterious. I say 'mysterious' and not 'uncertain', because there does seem to be some kind of enigmatic purpose at work in Lenny's story, although he never actually states what it is, preferring to leave it unexpressed. The anecdote is prompted - or at least appears to be - by Ruth's refusal to let him hold her hand, which might imply a coded warning for Ruth to comply with his request, or suffer the same fate as the "diseased" woman in the story. The abrupt absurdity of the *non-sequitur* which follows ("You and my brother are newly-weds, are you?") seems to underline the menace of the hint. Lenny's second anecdote, which follows immediately after the first and concerns an assault he makes upon an elderly woman, begins with his disconcerting declaration: "...I tend to get desensitized, if you know what I mean, when people make unreasonable demands on me" (48). There is just enough of an implicit threat in the line to give the whole speech a sense of thinly-veiled intimidation. In contrast to Joey and Max, who blurt out their feelings with little sense of mystery ("Don't you talk to me like that. I'm warning you." 23), Lenny manipulates the uncertainty of his intentions to maximum effect, alluding to but seldom stating the sinister possibilities of his semantics.

Seekers of Certainty.

If Lenny exploits uncertainty, then Teddy is frustrated by it. First and foremost, Teddy is the archetypal seeker of certainty. He exacts it from his wife, from his "critical works", from his homecoming. Unwilling to let his wife roam out on the

street alone, reluctant to answer questions which do not apply to his specialist, philosophical field, Teddy's 'certainties' soon reveal themselves to be far from certain. When Teddy insists that a table is nothing more than a table, Lenny is quick to mock: "Ah. You mean it's nothing else but a table. Well, some people would envy your certainty, wouldn't they, Joey?" (68). One critic has already remarked how, in this exchange, Teddy talks like an analytical philosopher, whilst Lenny appears to be an existentialist.³⁵ Teddy sees the table and cannot imagine it to be anything else, such is his faith in the stability of the sign. Lenny, on the other hand, entertains no such naiveté: as a devious and cunning manipulator of signs himself, he is fully aware of their exploitable uncertainty.

Teddy's belief in the steadfast link between signs and the things they represent has, amongst other things, the effect that his sense of certainty is always tied to a sense of place.

LENNY: Eh, Teddy, you haven't told us much about your Doctorship of Philosophy. What do you teach?

TEDDY: Philosophy.

LENNY: Well, I want to ask you something. Do you detect a certain logical incoherence in the central affirmations of Christian theism?

TEDDY: That question doesn't fall within my province.

LENNY: Well, look at it this way...you don't mind my asking you some questions, do you?

TEDDY: If they're within my province . (67-8)

Teddy's visible aversion towards straying out of the familiar, leaving his natural environment, finds its expression in this desire to remain within his "province". Teddy's sense of certainty requires that everything has its own place, that every field has its own proper questions - hence his pleasure at coming home and finding that "Nothing's changed". Everything is still in its place, "still the same". This need for things to stay as they are, *where* they are, manifests itself later on in Act II, when Ruth declares: "I was ...different...when I met Teddy...first." Teddy, resilient as ever to the faintest suggestion of mutability, insists: "No, you weren't . You were the same" (66). It is this desire to be in control of the signs around him which explains Teddy's disorientation when he encounters a sign that won't stay in its place. When

³⁵Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter*, p160

Ruth, late at night, expresses the desire to go out for a "stroll", Teddy cannot believe it:

TEDDY: At this time of night? But we've...only just got here. We've got to go to bed.

RUTH: I just feel like some air.

TEDDY: But I'm going to bed.

RUTH: That's all right.

TEDDY: But what am I going to do? ...I'm not going to bed without you. (40)

Unsettled by the signifier that won't stay in its natural place, in its "bed", Teddy simply does not know how to react. Regarding things which belong to his "province", Teddy does not handle unfamiliar behaviour any better than he handles unfamiliar questions. It is a scene which replicates itself at the end of Act II, when Teddy tells Ruth:

You just rest. I'll go and pack. (71)

Teddy's ineffective "will-to-power", if one can call it as such, becomes pathetic to observe as we finally see Ruth step out of her husband's "province" altogether. For someone who allegedly teaches philosophy (or possibly *because* he teaches philosophy), Teddy's view of reality is fundamentally naive: if he can only supply a comprehensive enough context, he need never worry about the sign wandering out of control. All that's required is the correct phrase or gesture, a reminder of Ruth's motherhood, perhaps, or a second honeymoon to Venice, and Ruth will always perform predictably in the role of her husband's wife. The last thirty minutes of the play show just how epistemologically inadequate Teddy's world view is: despite all his efforts to engineer the physical conditions which might render Ruth's actions predictable (to reduce her parameters of play, as it were) and force her to play the game of Faithful, Loving Wife, Ruth flouts them all without even displaying the semblance of a conscious intention. Events which render Teddy's dramatic outburst concerning his "critical works" in Act Two both absurd and comic:

You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they were about...You're very behind. All of you...Might do you good...have a look at them...see how certain people can maintain...intellectual equilibrium...You're just objects. You just ...move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do . It's the same as I do. But you're lost in it. You won't get me being...I won't be lost in it. (78)

The irony, of course, is that Teddy is already "lost in it", and has appeared so from the very beginning. In the final sentence, he even loses himself in the middle of saying how he hasn't lost himself. The inherent uncertainty of Ruth's behaviour make an explicit mockery of the speaker's claims to "intellectual equilibrium". Again, Teddy's words echo balance, harmony, order, words made farcical after the sight of his wife, rolling off the sofa with both of Teddy's brothers. It is interesting to see how Teddy expresses the difference between himself and his family, a difference which is neither based on "intelligence", nor on any essential difference in their behaviour ("I can see what you do. It's the same as I do.") What separates the philosopher from his family, Teddy declares, is *knowledge*. Being aware of what one is constitutes, presumably, this "intellectual equilibrium". Not for Teddy the unexamined, unreflective life - "It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things"(77). In a play so riddled with uncertainty and unpredictability, Teddy's outburst constitutes a curious flash of Enlightenment thinking, a re-surfacing of the old, deterministic, pre-quantum idea that uncertainty only occurs because of a lack of knowledge. The more one knows about the conditions of an experiment - its variables, its constants, its fluctuations - the more certain one can be about forecasting its results. The fact that all Teddy's attempts to determine his wife's faithfulness fail so dismally only serves to show how obsolete such a mode of thinking is in *The Homecoming*.

Although Hinchcliffe has called Lenny the "enigmatic centre of the play"³⁶, it is becoming quickly obvious as our argument progresses that the only character in the entire play who genuinely feels at home in uncertainty is Ruth. Never flustered, perturbed, disconcerted or at a loss for words even when faced with the most bizarre scenarios, Ruth exceeds even Lenny in her dealings with - and exploitation of - uncertainty. In contrast to her determinist of a husband, Ruth seems to have understood exactly the quantum nature of reality in *The Homecoming*: she is not tied to some notion of the stable sign, does not expect the world around her to work in a certain way, and therefore is not 'disoriented' (to use Dukore's words) when the unexpected occurs, such as her father-in-law calling her a "disease" or her brother-in-

³⁶ibid, p162

law asking her to hold her hand. Unlike Lenny, she does not "get desensitized" when people "make unreasonable demand" on her, because she is not tied to any constant, unchanging idea of the word 'reasonable'. We have already examined in section 2.2.2 how Ruth manages to 'determine' Lenny whilst remaining 'indeterminate' herself. What I would like to examine in this final section is how Ruth, as the most uncertain element in the play, wreaks havoc and frustration on those certainty-seekers around her by constantly thwarting their attempts to constrain her parameters of play.

Mark C. Taylor, the deconstructive critic and theologian, writes in a passage which has some interesting resonances for our own investigation of the feminine and the uncertain:

When the subject is driven by the need to close gaps and fill holes, the phallus becomes the focus of the sexual relation. From the phallogocentric perspective, "The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open'. It is an *appeal to being*, as all holes are. In herself, woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution."³⁷

Taylor is citing Sartre here in terms which quickly become graphically carnal: certainty as the filling of an emptiness, the vanquishing of a nothingness, the closing of a gap. "Christ, she's wide open" says Joey (74), upon returning into the front room to find Ruth kissing Lenny in front of her husband. Aware that Ruth is no longer exclusively tied to any one male, he makes the mistake of assuming anyone can appropriate her. "She's a tart...Old Lenny's got a tart in her." Naturally, both Lenny and Joey are elated to find that Ruth's marital status is no longer so clear. Ruth's transgressive dance with Lenny, culminating in their kiss, frees her from the certainty of Teddy's "province" and allows her to roam where she will, with *whom* she will.

Thus begins the final episode of the play, where Teddy's family prove themselves to be just as inept in dealing with Ruth's unpredictability as Teddy has been. The uncertainty personified in Ruth now manifests itself in the question: is she a "tart" or a "tease"?

LENNY: The girl's a tease.

³⁷Taylor, Mark C., *ErRing: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984) p28, cit. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p728

MAX: What?

LENNY: She's had Joey on a string.

MAX: What do you mean?

TEDDY: He had her up there for two hours and he didn't go the whole hog. (84)

Time and time again, Ruth unnerves her would-be 'employers' with one unexpected move after another: she allows Joey to caress her, even lie on top of her, then suddenly gets up and takes immediate control of the situation, abruptly demanding food and drink from her suitors of three seconds ago. Joey's failure to "go the whole hog" with her, to dispel the uncertainty Ruth represents, constitutes another example of the enigma's resistance to all seekers of knowledge. Joey is "frustrated", both sexually and epistemologically. No-one can believe it. "My Joey? She did that to my boy?" cries Max (84). In a scenario where everyone is obsessed with who "gets the gravy" (Lenny's interesting euphemism for sexual consummation), the irony of *The Homecoming* seems to be that no-one ever *does* get the gravy. The mystery of Ruth, so to speak, remains intact.

Of course, Ruth's complicity in their plans to prostitute her - not to mention the drawing up of a contract - might signify the final, contractualised determining of her status, 'legally-binding' in all senses of the word. Could this not be seen as the final triumph of Certainty, successfully confining and commodifying Ruth on the basis of a series of rigid obligations? In response to this, four points must be made. Firstly, although Ruth considers the family's proposition a "very attractive idea", she appears enigmatically reluctant to finalise the arrangement at that moment. "Do you want to shake on it now, or do you want to leave it till later?" asks Max. "Oh, we'll leave it till later" says Ruth (94). Secondly, it is Ruth who proposes the contract and practically draws up all its conditions, handling Max and Lenny with childlike ease as she delineates the conditions of the arrangement, even down to the size of her wardrobe. "I'd need an awful lot. Otherwise I wouldn't be content" (93). Thirdly, it is by no means clear that contracts actually mean anything to Ruth. Why should she consider her 'marriage' to the family anymore authentic and binding than her marriage to Teddy? Finally, after Ruth's deception of Joey, there is the possibility that Ruth will not take her new-found vocation 'seriously' enough - that she will play with the clients, rather than satisfy them, a possibility which seems to worry Max more than most:

But there's something worrying me. Perhaps she's not up to the mark. Eh?
 Teddy, you're the best judge...I mean what about all this teasing? Is she going to
 make a habit of it? That'll get us nowhere. (89)

The old uncertainty still remains: "tart" or "tease"? It is an important question for Max, who sees Ruth as introducing an undesirable element of unpredictability into an otherwise sound commercial venture, not to mention Max's plans for his own sexual gratification. This inability to forecast Ruth's actions with any degree of certainty problematizes the whole money-making scheme. Uncertainty, suddenly, becomes an obstacle to pleasure and profit. Consider the old man's rant at the end of the play:

I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us...I
 can tell you!...You want to bet?
Pause.
 She won't ...be adaptable! (97)

Ruth has her 'employers' so confused that they are no longer even certain of being uncertain anymore ("Do you think she's got it clear?"). In his desire to "use" her, Max contemplates the appalling possibility that she is using *them*. Ruth simply remains enigmatically silent, a move which underlines the helpless pathos of the old man's unanswered question. His fear that Ruth will not prove "adaptable" is all too ironic: ultimately, it is the family which has shown itself completely unable to adapt in any way to the indeterminate cluster of beliefs and desires that calls itself "Ruth". Despite all their attempts to quantify Ruth, determine her, insert her into the commercial order of their own arrangements, even to the extent of trying to find a different, more appropriate name for her - "Spanish Jacky" suggests Max - Ruth, at the end of the play, remains indefinably, elusively in control.

Negative Possibilities.

Perhaps such a rendering of the play as the triumph of Uncertainty over Certainty is not without its problems. In order to arrive at such a reading, certain choices have been made, certain ambiguities overlooked, the paradoxical language of certainty has been used which even a discussion of the uncertain cannot avoid. Nevertheless, the point remains: in Eckhart, uncertainty is that which instigates

initiation into "the mystery of God"³⁸ and allows the believer "to know God in a divine manner".³⁹ In Derrida, uncertainty produces the "joyous affirmation" which will enable the one-time truth-seeker to "pass beyond man and humanism" and obtain a different kind of innocence, the "innocence of becoming".⁴⁰ In *The Homecoming*, however, the state of uncertainty only ever seems to produce frustration and subjection. Far from being positive and productive, uncertainty is used strategically to disarm, bewilder and subdue.

Esslin, in *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1968, writes:

The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being - that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet; the difference, to take an example from another sphere, between the *idea* of God in the works of Thomas Aquinas or Spinoza and the *intuition* of God in those of St John of the Cross or Meister Eckhart - the difference between theory and experience.⁴¹

One could take issue with the slightly simplistic scholastic /mystic - theory /practice scheme into which Esslin fits Aquinas and Eckhart; Eckhart surely does a lot more than merely translate the Thomist God into Eckhartian practice. Esslin, writing barely a generation after *L'Etranger* and *L'Etre et Le Nèant*, cannot see Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter as anything other than a direct consequence of French existentialism. To paraphrase Esslin: the Theatre of the Absurd, as opposed to the Philosophers of the Absurd, does not *tell* but *shows*. Not only does it depict an encounter with the Absurd, it seeks to replicate an identical sense of the absurd in the audience. Tired of 'rationalizing' about the irrational, it engineers a series of conditions in which the absurd is directly experienced by the spectator.

Esslin's exposition of Pinter's existentialist heritage is by no means erroneous - the Sartrean dictum of existence preceding essence, for example, could be applied perfectly well to Ruth in *The Homecoming*. What I would finally like to suggest,

³⁸Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1994) p137, taken from the sermon *Eratis enim aliquando in tenebrae*

³⁹Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p224, from the sermon *Et cum factus esset Jesus*

⁴⁰Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978) p292

⁴¹Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968) p25

however, is that for a reader/spectator of 1998, *The Homecoming* may equally well be construed as a play about epistemological skepticism⁴², about a wandering, unruly, enigmatic text that can never quite be mastered. In the first part of this section, reference was made to a possible reading of *The Homecoming* as depicting "an array of guilty, Rousseauistic stooges", a reading which sees Pinter's text as enacting "the negative possibilities of Derrida's project by portraying what happens when people refuse to affirm the play of the world and constantly - tragically - seek assurance from the unstable signs around them." Pinter's *The Homecoming* could be seen as an admonitory representation of what happens when people tie themselves to things, or to their desires for things, instead of acknowledging - as Ruth does, and as Lenny tries to do - the unmasterable, ever-changing reality of the Heraclitean flux which surrounds them. The effect is two-fold: we feel uncertainty as we watch the play proceed and unfold its bizarre series of *volte-faces* and mood changes upon us (father-in-laws hurling abuse at their offspring and then asking for cuddles, brother-in-laws trying to seduce their kin's wives, etc). Simultaneously, in the midst of our uncertainty, we recognise the uncertainty of the family as they try to wheedle Ruth into co-operating with them. Their inability to predict Ruth's behaviour parallels our own uncertainty as to where the play is heading, about what it all 'means'. If this is what Esslin intends by translating "theory" into "experience", then *The Homecoming* seems to be an efficient realisation of such a project.

⁴²Laurence St John Butler's "Beckett's Stage of Deconstruction" (in Brian Docherty's *Twentieth Century European Drama* [Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1994]) has already examined the deconstructive implications of Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*.

III. Uncertainty, Whylessness and the Wandering Joy

3.1 The Motif of Wandering in Eckhart and Derrida

In the previous chapter, we examined uncertainty in terms of the critique of presence - and how such uncertainty is seen by both negative theology and deconstruction as a liberating and generative condition. The aim of this chapter is to examine and re-propose the same sentiment, from a radically different angle: the fact that both Derrida and Eckhart, in completely different contexts, talk about 'joyous wandering', will form the basis of our investigations. Uncertainty understood as 'wandering' - that is, as an abandonment not just of origins and motivations, but also of goals and destinations.

In both Eckhart and Derrida's 'pathless ways', the wandering motif acts as an important symbol of their affirmation of the uncertain. It is a motif, this section will suggest, which is both *descriptive* (describing the inherent errancy/unmasterability of the divine or of the text) and also *prescriptive* (suggesting new ways of responding to the divine or to the text). However, before looking at what Derrida and Eckhart have to say about the peregrinary, it will first be necessary to briefly review the scriptural echoes and resonances of the verb 'to wander', in order to understand precisely why Eckhart and Derrida's positive re-appropriation of *irren* and *errer* is so ironic.

3.1.1 Some Biblical Considerations.

Although it is difficult to write anything substantially original about the concept of 'wandering' after Mark C. Taylor's sprawling, quotation-studded work *ErRing: A Postmodern A/theology*, the initially negative significance of 'to wander' in the Bible (and all its various synonyms: to err, to deviate, to stray) is clear. The Psalmist writes: "My steps have held to your paths: my feet have not slipped." (17:5). To wander is to lose sight of such a path, to deviate from a certain code of behaviour, to veer away from a certain destination. Christ's assertion in John 14:6 illustrates this thematic link between the itinerary and the quest for certainty: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life". If the path (in Greek *hodos*, from which we derive the word

'method') is to be associated with truth, then clearly any deviation from it leads to error, confusion, despair. One does not, however, always have to choose to wander - the tradition in the Old Testament of wandering as punishment is also evident: the eviction from one's land, as God's admonition to Cain suggests ("Thou shalt be a restless wanderer upon the earth" Genesis 4:12), the wandering tribes of Israel...wandering understood as homelessness, as destitution, as exile.¹

Working against this negative interpretation of the peregrinary, both Eckhart and Derrida's affirmation of pathlessness do evoke, consciously or no, some of the more positive motifs of the errant glimpsed in the New Testament. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head." (Luke 10:24). Christ the wandering, itinerant preacher, moving from village to village, town to town, with no family, home or occupation to tie him down, constantly inciting those around him to participate in the same kind of homelessness: "Sell everything you have and give to the poor...then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). To wander is a symptom of the divine: to have no need of origins, to scoff at destinations.

Therefore, the meaning of erring in the Bible displays the very ambiguity which the verb retains today. On the one hand, to wander is seen as an act of transgression, a departure from a certain path, or even a march along the wrong one. On the other, it also constitutes a gesture of freedom, an unwillingness that the infinite divine should be tied to a finite place, image or dictum. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going to. So it is with those born of the Spirit." (John 3:8). To what extent does the Eckhartian/Derridean corpus replicate and exploit the resonances of this biblical motif? To what extent does it depart from it?

¹ One thinks of Mr Deasly's anti-Semitic ramblings in *Ulysses*: "-They sinned against the light, Mr Deasly said gravely. And you can see the darkness in their eyes. And that is why they are wanderers on the earth to this day." *Ulysses* (London: Bodley Head, 1960) p41

Attitudes Towards Pilgrimages and Wandering in Eckhart's Time.

And ye that seek St James and saints of Rome,
Seeketh St Truth, for he may save you all.²

It is difficult to evaluate, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, exactly how Eckhart's contemporary audiences (both scholarly and unlearned) would have responded to the phrase 'pathless way'. What Constable has already underlined as "the ambiguity of medieval attitudes towards" pilgrimage complicate the reception of Eckhart's thoughts on wandering and his exhortation to live a life free of motives and goals, plans and destinations.³

By Eckhart's time, the ritual of the pilgrimage in all its bewildering variety of forms was one of the most common forms of religious practice in Europe. Apart from Constantinople and the Holy Land, the four main shrines in Europe - Rome, Cologne, Canterbury and Santiago de Compostella - were drawing increasing numbers of pilgrims, creating by themselves a network of inns, transport, tours and ultimately clerical indulgences. Historians such as Sumption see the development and elaboration of the medieval pilgrimage - from St Jerome's first journey to the Holy Land in the fourth century to the travels of Felix Fabri in the fifteenth - as a spiritually downward degradation of an essentially private activity into a more public and less sincere obligation - a "progression from private austerity to popular enthusiasm and thence to abstract ritual".⁴ Pilgrimage, concludes Sumption, had "begun as an accessory to the moral teaching of the Church, and ended as an alternative".⁵ It is difficult not to agree with such a verdict, particularly bearing in mind the efforts the church took (especially in the century of Eckhart) to capitalize on the popularity of pilgrimages by accepting monetary indulgences as a substitute for actually travelling there.⁶

² Langland - cit. without reference in Johnathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: an Image of Medieval Devotion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975) p290

³ Giles Constable in his essay "Opposition to Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages" from Constable, *Religious Life and Thought 11th to 12th Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979) p146

⁴ Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, p289

⁵ *ibid*, p289

⁶ Amongst numerous examples, Sumption relates the instance of Clement VI, who in 1352 "allowed the population of Mallorca to claim the jubilee indulgence without actually going to Rome, in return for a money payment equal to the cost of the journey". Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, p291

Even in the beginning, however, critics of the pilgrimage were many in number. St Jerome's opinion, in a passage from his fifty-eighth letter, was oft-quoted: "It is praiseworthy not to have been in Jerusalem but to have lived well for Jerusalem".⁷ Gregory of Nyssa's remark that "travel cannot bring a man closer to God", along with Augustine's own observation in the *Contra Faustum* that "God is in all places and ...is not contained or enclosed in any one place" (a statement Eckhart would completely agree with)⁸ stands in contradiction to the basic idea of pilgrimage: that the believer's *physical* presence in a *certain* place, their *physical* witness of a *certain* spectacle or location, could bring about direct *spiritual* benefits and even the forgiveness of sins.

Although Gregory of Nyssa's objection that a mere journey is no substitute for spiritual contrition remains valid, it is Augustine's much deeper objection to the idea of the pilgrimage which interests us. "He is everywhere on account of His infinity, and is everywhere complete..." writes Eckhart in a similar vein⁹ - and it is precisely this conviction of the omnipresence of God in all things (and consequently all places) which would make Eckhart's 'pathless way' so difficult to accept in an age dominated by the practice of the pilgrim. The idea that God is to be found in one particular place - and not in 'all things' - runs squarely against the whole spirit of Eckhart's thought. Dorothea R. French's excellent essay on pilgrimages to the Holy Land and medieval cartography graphically illustrates how the practice of pilgrimage gradually transformed Mt Calvary into the centre of the sacred world:

The 'real' world of sacred cartographers in Late Antiquity had become the literal world of Christian cartographers in the High Middle Ages. The world was infused with multiple levels of meanings that drew one into the centre in ever-smaller concentric rings.¹⁰

A far cry from Eckhartian wandering, the popularity of pilgrimages would have convinced most of Eckhart's listeners that the closer one physically came to the Holy

⁷ "Opposition to Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages" in Giles Constable, *Religious Life and Thought 11th to 12th Centuries*, p126

⁸ both quotes are found in "Opposition to Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages" in Giles Constable, *Religious Life and Thought 11th to 12th Centuries*, p125-6

⁹ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p258 - Latin Sermon XXIX

Land, the closer one came to God. Eckhart's exhortation to wander without a destination, to ramble without a motivation, would have fallen on if not deaf, then at the very least bewildered ears.

Purely theological objections apart, pilgrimages were often criticised for a number of other, more material reasons. Erasmus' "A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake" (circa 1524) is probably the most famous and certainly the funniest satire on the desire to *peregrer*. Comprising of a dialogue between the cynical Menedemus (lit. "stay-at-home") and the enthusing Ogygius, the latter tells of his visit to the shrine of St James at Santiago ("Tell me, how is the excellent James?" "Much colder than usual").¹¹ Amongst other things, we learn how Mother Mary is grateful to Luther for discouraging the growth of pilgrimage, thereby allowing her a little more peace and quiet, undisturbed by entreaties. Menedemus, fond of "mocking the saints", allows the reader to relish his friend's naivete, particularly when he reports how, on a visit to the shrine of St Thomas, a fellow pilgrim asks the guide an especially awkward question:

'I say, good father, is it true, as I've heard, that in his lifetime Thomas was most generous to the poor? 'Very true', the man replied, and began to rehearse the saint's many acts of kindness to them....Gratian again: 'Since, then, the saint was so liberal towards the needy, though he was still poor himself and lacked money to provide for the necessities of life, don't you think he'd gladly consent, now that he's so rich and needs nothing, if some poor wretched woman with children at home...carried off a bit of all this wealth to rescue her family...?'¹²

Erasmus' satire, as subtle and as accomplished as ever, brings to light what was probably a key motive in many objections against pilgrimages in the Middle Ages - the disconcerting zeal with which many would try and profit from the spirituality of others, not to mention the incongruity between the wealth and ostentation of the saints' shrines and the frugality of the lives they actually led.

Not all accounts of the standard pilgrimage were so scathing, however. Margery Kempe's Book (written - or rather transcribed for her - around 1433) relates

¹⁰ Dorothea R. French, "Journeys to the Center of the Earth" - found in Barbara N. Sargent-Baur (ed), *Journeys Toward God* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992) p64

¹¹ taken from *Collected Works of Erasmus* (trans. Craig R. Thompson - London: University of Toronto Press, 1997) vol.40, p623

¹² *ibid*, p644

the travails and sufferings of a woman on pilgrimage, with striking emphasis on the spiritual significance of the experiences and little on their actual description:

This creature, when our Lord had forgiven her her sin (as has been written before), had a desire to see those places where he was born, and where he suffered his Passion and where he died, together with other holy places where he was during his life, and also after his resurrection.¹³

Readers hoping to find in Kempe's narrative some description of the shrines at Assisi, Rome, Santiago and the Holy Land will be disappointed. What Kempe relates above all are the difficulties she encountered there - difficulties, moreover, concerning the fellow pilgrims just as much as the actual pilgrimage itself. In Chapter 30, for example, the narrator's desire to climb "Mt Querentayne" (where Christ was believed to have fasted for forty days) is hampered not only by the physical difficulty of the climb, but also by her fellow pilgrims' unwillingness to have her accompany them on their journey. As no one is willing to help her up the mountain, she sits at the foot of it, feeling miserable until

...a Saracen, a good-looking man, happened to come by her, and she put a groat into his hand, making signs to him to take her up the mountain. And quickly the Saracen took her under his arm and led her up the high mountain where Our Lord faster forty days. Then she was dreadfully thirsty and got no sympathy from her fellow pilgrims, but then God, of his high goodness, moved the Grey Friars with compassion, and they comforted her...¹⁴

More than satisfying any kind of spiritual curiosity, Kempe's pilgrimages seem to take on the role of ordeals. The narrator's world is invariably a dangerous, hostile place, one which the practice of pilgrimage (particularly in Italy, see Chapters 30 - 42) only exacerbates. One cannot imagine a more different account of pilgrimage than Friar Felix Fabri, whose fifteenth century account - far from being any record of austere, self-righteous deprivation and spiritual ordeal - is intended to be read "with pleasure and amusement in the intervals of more fruitful studies".¹⁵ No record of visionary experiences and inner struggles à la Kempe, but on the contrary a collection

¹³ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. into modern English by A.B.Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1994) p67

¹⁴ *ibid*, p110

¹⁵ H.F.M.Prescott, *Jerusalem Journey* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1954) p14

of “great things and true, grave things and holy” interspersed with things “silly, improbably and comical”.¹⁶ It is difficult to imagine a more different kind of pilgrim from Kempe. Felix, on the historian Prescott’s own account, is “no great scholar or thinker”¹⁷, drawing uncritically as he does on a collection of extremely dubious and often contradictory sources for the cosmology and geography in his books (Ludolph von Suchen, for example, from whom Felix obtains the fact that, on the straits of Gibraltar, “where the African and European coasts are closest together, stand a Moslem and Christian washerwoman, each abusing the other from her native shore”).¹⁸ Although the motivation of the more altruistic pilgrims often lay in a desire to describe the sights they had seen to those back home who could not embark upon the voyage, Friar Felix seems at times to be more interested in pagan sights than Christian ones. Fond, on his own confession, of “seeing strange and curious sights”, he tries desperately upon his arrival in Jerusalem to enter the Dome of the Rock (the Haram ashsharif) - out of bounds to Christians and Jews.¹⁹ His journals are filled with references to and descriptions of the Saracens he encountered there and in Syria, and he is keen to remark upon their customs and dress, their chants (*allah illahah allah illah* - “There is no God but the God Allah”) and behaviour - a curiosity for other cultures which puts him nearer the travelling orientalist rather than the grim, earnest shrine-seeker.

And yet, the question remains: why exactly did people go on pilgrimages? The reasons are varied - certainly Constable, in the article “Monachisme et pèlerinage au Moyen Age”, is correct in linking together the monastic urge with that of the pilgrim, a physical voyage “at the same time *ex patria* and *ad loca santa*”²⁰: “In this, the ideal of the pilgrimage is not very different from that of monasticism, which also implies a new spiritual life...”.²¹ Robert Worth Frank, Jnr reports how some anthropologists have described the experience of pilgrimage as ‘liminoid’:

¹⁶ *ibid*, p14

¹⁷ *ibid*, p72

¹⁸ *ibid*, p70

¹⁹ *ibid*, p175

²⁰ ²⁰ “Monachisme et pèlerinage au Moyen Age” in Giles Constable, *Religious Life and Thought 11th to 12th Centuries*, p119 own trans

²¹ *ibid*, p120

This they define as like liminal experiences (rites of passage) in some respects but unlike them in being voluntary. Liminal experience is characterized by release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; *communitas*; healing and renewal; ordeal; removal from a mundane center to a sacred periphery.²²

The idea of pilgrimage as a renewing experience - one which would bring about a revival of one's inner faith through a physical change in one's immediate environment - is certainly the driving motive for Margery Kempe, if not for the Wife of Bath. Of course, pilgrimage was sometimes imposed as a punishment - Sumption spends a chapter of his book offering a deluge of instances where sinners were punished with an enforced pilgrimage, such as the emperor Otto III (St Romuald ordered him to walk barefoot to Mt Gargano after the murder of a Roman senator).²³ Often such sins were extremely 'public' sins which had caused great scandal in the community - misbehaving clergy, for example, were often required to undertake this *penitentia publica non sollemnis*.²⁴

Many desired to visit the Holy Land out of a simple yearning to relive the experiences of the New Testament in the very place and climate where they happened - a "desire to recreate in their imagination the scenes of Christ's ministry and passion".²⁵ J.G.Davies, in his essay on "Pilgrimage and Crusade Literature", relates how the first itineraries "soon developed into pilgrim diaries", embellished with the pilgrim's own religious observations.²⁶ It is interesting to see how, as the centuries progressed, a much more pious desire to see Calvary or the Mount of Olives soon began to broaden into a less holy, more secular *curiositas* for new places and experiences - "a shift in motivation that was eventually to distinguish the Renaissance voyager from the medieval pilgrim".²⁷

Of all the examples of pilgrimage available to us, probably the nearest any of them came to Eckhart's aimless wandering were the Irish pilgrims of the seventh and eighth centuries, referred to in both AIII and Sumption. Pilgrims without any kind of

²² taken from Robert Worth Frank, Jr.'s essay "Pilgrimage and Sacred Power" in Sargent-Baur, *Journeys Toward God*, p33

²³ Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, p99

²⁴ *ibid*, p99

²⁵ *ibid*, p89

²⁶ taken from J.G.Davies' essay "Pilgrimage and Crusade Literature" in Sargent-Baur, *Journeys Toward God*, p3

²⁷ *ibid*, p11

destination, they expressed the spirit of St Columban's teaching by wandering freely throughout the world in heavenly exile - as one twelfth century follower put it: "...be exiles for God's sake, and go not only to Jerusalem but everywhere, for God himself is everywhere."²⁸ Although Sumption notes imitative examples of these "Irish wanderers" in Germany as late as the twelfth century, the practice of freely itinerant clerics wandering from monastery to monastery was discouraged by St Boniface in 740 and strictly forbidden by a Frankish synod in 751. Such unauthorised wanderings, relates Sumption, were considered "destructive of ecclesiastical discipline" by Benedictine monasticism and "instrumental in spreading 'unnecessary doubts' among the people" (a charge which would, much later, be applied to Eckhart himself).²⁹

3.1.2 Eckhart's "Pathless Way".

A response to these two questions, on Eckhart's part, must carefully delineate exactly how the motif of wandering manifests itself in Eckhart's sermons. It is not difficult to imagine how such sermons - with their emphasis on spiritual spontaneity, divine aimlessness, unconditional actions and the ontological 'opening' and 'emptying' of oneself to God - can be considered examples of a 'wandering thought'. Sermons which have not only directly inspired titles such as Reiner Schürmann's 1972 work *Maitre Eckhart ou la joie errante*, but also Angelus Silesius' famous *Cherubic Wanderer*³⁰, whose poem "The Rose is without Why: it blooms because it blooms" is written in clear homage to the Eckhartian tenet of the *sunder warumbe*, the 'without-why'.

The term 'pathless way' (*wec âne wec*) is mentioned in Eckhart's sermon *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum* - the pathless way which "is free and yet fixed, in which we are raised and exalted above ourselves and all things, with neither will nor images..." (*vrî und doch gebunden, erhaben und gezucket vil nach über sich und*

²⁸ Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, p96

²⁹ *ibid*, p97

³⁰ a work to which, incidentally, Derrida devotes considerable attention in his long 1993 essay on apophatic theology *Sauf le nom* (Paris: éditions galilée, 1993). For more on the link between Angelus

alliu dinc âne willen und âne bilde...).³¹ Eckhart's phrase is deliberately paradoxical, and in this it reflects what Eckhart sees as the necessity of a spiritual direction, but simultaneously the danger that such a direction will be codified and institutionalised into a doctrinal path. Can we arrive at where we want to go without adhering to such paths? In such an adherence to the itinerary, Eckhart seems to perceive a certain danger: "For whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God..." (*Wan swer got suochet in wîse, der nimet die wîse und lât got...*).³² Just as Derrida sees structuralism's main flaw as an exclusive obsession with the concept of structure at the expense of the text, a concept of structure which "becomes *in fact and despite his theoretical intention* the critic's sole preoccupation"³³, so Eckhart sees a path to God as potentially becoming more important than God Himself. In following such a path, one risks deifying it, idolizing it, transforming it into the object (and the end) of one's attentions.

Thus Eckhart's 'pathless way' is not an incitement to moral abandon or self-indulgence, but an attempt to find a different, 'wayless' way of breaking through to the Godhead, free of images, concepts and doctrines. The errant, therefore, is not necessarily erroneous. One is tempted to ask: when *do* people err (sinfully) in Eckhart, if such pathlessness is seen as spiritually enhancing? Eckhart's response to this, in one sermon, is to stress the need for the soul to be free of all conceptions of God, self and external obligations. "Therefore the only reason why anyone has ever erred in anything is that they have departed from this and have turned too much to external things".³⁴ In order to breakthrough to the Godhead, the soul must be as "free and untrammelled" as God is, which is where - as we will see - the Eckhartian theme of 'detachment' takes on a central role, distinguishing itself from the attachment to a "special way". In short: people only ever err, for Eckhart, when they methodically follow a path.

Silesius and Eckhart, see John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978) pp97-99

³¹ Oliver Davies(ed), *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994) p197, taken from the sermon *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum* - Sermon 86 in Quint 3:486

³² M.O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises* (London: Watkins, 1979) vol 1 p117 - from *In hoc apparuit caritas dei in nobis*- Largier, Predigt 5b, 70

³³ *Writing and Difference*, p15

³⁴ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p217, from the sermon *Ubi est qui natus est rex judaeorum?*

Wandering as Identity with God.

Why does Eckhart urge us along his “pathless way”? Why is the ramble superior to the journey, the uncertainty of the peregrinary preferable to the destination of the pilgrimage? Eckhart’s suspicion of the pathbound and the goal-orientated (a suspicion which translates ‘destination’ as ‘motivation’) as ultimately constituting that which sterilizes and reifies faith, is one response to this question. However, on a much more basic level, Eckhart’s affirmation of errancy lies in conjunction with his desire to breakthrough to the Godhead: to ‘wander’, in the Eckhartian sense, is to imitate God. Which in turn means that if God is a divine uncertainty, then we must become a kind of uncertainty ourselves.

In order to understand this better, two points need to be made - first of all, a standard motif in Christian thought is the desirability of the soul’s likeness to God. The soul is born in a state of unlikeness - Augustine’s *regio dissimilitudinis*³⁵ - and must strive to resemble more and more its Creator in order to achieve union with it. Eckhart is in perfect accord with this: “Our masters say union presupposes likeness. Union cannot be without likeness.” (*Daz sprechent unser meister: einunge wil haben glîchnisse. Einunge enmac niht gesîn, si enhabe glîchnisse.*)³⁶ It is only through identity with God that Eckhart can achieve the birth of God in the soul: “A master says: all likeness means birth. He says further that like is not found in Nature unless it is born”.³⁷ In order to undergo the mystical experience of engendering God in the ground of the soul, the soul must become ‘like’ God.

Secondly, the Eckhartian Godhead which the wandering soul imitates is nameless, place-less, image-less. It has no origins and no destination. We saw in the previous chapter how the Eckhartian Godhead, like the Derridean text, is resistant to all totalisation, to use Kevin Hart’s phrase. “No-one can really say what God

³⁵ from *Confessions*, Bk 7, Ch 10

³⁶ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, p163, from the sermon *Postquam completi erant dies* - Sermon 44 in Quint 2:338

³⁷ *ibid* p164

is.”(...ez enkan von gote nieman reden eigenliche daz, daz er ist).³⁸ Just as all the effects of the Godhead are unconditional and unmotivated, a simple ‘overflowing’ - God’s love essentially being ‘without why’ - so must all our actions and words be bereft of result-seeking motives and expectations. To have no destination, to not care about one’s origins, is a step towards the divine.

If the likeness of the soul to God is essential as a prerequisite to their union, and if such a God is a divine no-thingness, aimlessly ebullient, we can begin to understand why Eckhart sees errancy as anything but error. Schürmann writes: “Identity is gained only this way; identity with God is wandering”.³⁹ The fact that the Eckhartian Godhead possesses no co-ordinates, cannot be linked to a particular shrine or mountain-top, reinforces Eckhart’s preference for the wanderer over the pilgrim:

A pagan master says: the nothingness of God fills all things while his somethingness is nowhere. And so the soul cannot find God’s somethingness unless first she is reduced to nothingness wherever she may be...Therefore a master says: whoever wishes to come to God should take nothing with him.⁴⁰

It is a passage which, in many ways, reminds one of Borges’ famous essay on the non-location of the deity “The Fearful Sphere of Pascal” (“God is a fearful sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere”)⁴¹. If God’s “somethingness” is no-where, then whoever wishes to find this “somethingness” must forget the pilgrimage, must abandon all their itineraries, must rid themselves of any notion of where - for God lies “no-where”. This abandonment of destination, one may say tentatively, is the first real similarity the Eckhartian motif of wandering has with the Derridean notion of ‘centrelessness’. The passage cited could be re-described as an urge to abandon the onto-theological centre we rely on to furnish our conceptions and images of God, in virtue of a spiritual ‘centrelessness’, one which would let God be God.

³⁸ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p158, taken from the sermon *Homo quidam cenat* - Sermon 20a in Quint 1:329

³⁹ Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) p47

⁴⁰ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p247

⁴¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (trans. Donald A. Yates and Jane A. Isby [London: Penguin, 1995]) p227

The principal reason why one should abandon such a centre, however, is different in both writers: for Eckhart, one might say, the centre (the idea of a 'somewhere') is false quite simply because it is not where God lives, its 'somewhere' and the space-bound vocabulary and images that go with it are too finite to embrace the infinite incommensurability of God. For Derrida, however, the 'centre' should be forgotten not because of some semantic inability to fully constitute a certain meaning, but simply because it is nothing more than a sign: a sign which, when called upon to explain its centrality, could only ever produce more signs, which in turn would lead to more *ad infinitum* - destinations leading to other destinations, endlessly. The centre, therefore, is always chained to an illusory presence. This difference between the two writers is a consistent one, one which admittedly still paints Eckhart as the victim (or perpetrator) of a persistent logocentrism - it is a difference, however, which will be increasingly called into question as our project progresses. For now, Eckhart's 'somewhere' is abandoned ("in its literality at least"⁴²) because it is ontologically inadequate, whereas Derrida's 'somewhere' is rejected because it is always, infinitely 'elsewhere'.

Eckhartian Whylessness - the *Sunder Warumbe*

What is unsaid in the saying, and everything depends on this, is rather that man, in the most hidden ground of his essence, first truly is, when he is in his own way like the rose, without-why.
-Heidegger⁴³

To briefly recap: Eckhart's "pathless way" is proffered for three reasons. Firstly, in following a path too closely, there is a danger that the soul will follow the path instead of God (a danger whose implications will be examined more closely in the next chapter). Secondly, as God's ebullience is aimless, the soul that wishes to achieve union with God must become aimless too. Thirdly, as "God is nowhere...not here or there, not in time or place"⁴⁴, then no path can ever lead to Him.

Therefore, Eckhart performs two gestures: he *describes* the wandering nature of the Godhead - that is, nameless, ebullient, aimless - and then *prescribes* the

⁴² *Writing and Difference* 146, 217

⁴³ cit. in Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, p187

errancy necessary in order to breakthrough to the Godhead. It is important to note that the soul in Eckhart 'wanders' not simply in order to imitate the divine, but also because it already knows the divine, for knowledge (in scholastic terms) brings likeness. Here Eckhart quotes Augustine: "As you love, so you are. If you love the earth, you will become earthly; if you love God, you will be divine".⁴⁵ If you love errancy, then you too will become errant. In this sense, 'wandering' in Eckhart is simultaneously a response to the aimless ebullience of the divine, and also a consequence of it.

Eckhart's motif of the 'without-why' is perhaps the clearest example of how God's purposelessness is translated into practice:

All things that are in time have a why. Thus when someone asks a man: "Why are you eating?" "In order to gain strength." "Why are you sleeping?" "For the same reason". And so with every thing that is in time. But if someone asked a good man: "Why do you love God?" "I do not know, because of God." "Why do you love the truth?" "Because of the truth." "Why do you love justice?" "Because of justice." "Why are you living?" "My word, I do not know! But I am happy to be alive!"⁴⁶

When challenged, why does the model reply of Eckhart's "good man" not refer to anything outside of itself? Why does the "good man" refuse to supply an external, rational reason for his love of justice? Partly, as we have seen, because in order to imitate the divine, one's good works must be groundless - that is, without motivations and without conditions. Although this moves remarkably close to Kierkegaard (doing things "on the strength of the absurd"⁴⁷) and the idea that "only lower natures...have the premises for their actions outside themselves"⁴⁸, Eckhart actually wants to get beyond any idea of a premise at all. If one bears in mind Jabès' words on the vitality of uncertainty, the relevance of Eckhart's 'without-why' to this affirmation of openness becomes clear. Eckhart here refuses to connect *causally* a series of completely Christian gestures to some kind of conceptual, programmatic fossilizing scheme of thought. It is the refusal to chain one's gestures to a finite,

⁴⁴ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, p247 from the sermon *Si consurrexistis cum Christo*

⁴⁵ *ibid* p165 from the sermon *Postquam completi erant dies*

⁴⁶ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p56 from the sermon *Mulier, venit hora et nunc est*

⁴⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (trans. Alistair Hannay [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985])

p77

⁴⁸ *Fear and Trembling*, p73

motivating concept, thereby turning one's actions into a simple series of "in-order-to"s. This resistance to the desire to justify our actions will always play a central role in Eckhart - in his sermon *Qui sequitur iustitiam* he writes: "The just person acts precisely as God acts, without a Why, and so as life lives for its own sake, seeking nothing to justify itself, in the same way the just person knows no Why to justify what they do".⁴⁹ Eckhart, for all his Dominican primacy of the intellect, seems in these passages to relegate the intellective and powers of the soul to a secondary role, in favour of a more pre-reflective course of action - to love God "non-mentally" (*nichgeistliche*⁵⁰), as he says elsewhere. In this aversion towards intellectualizing about the origins of one's actions - even to the extent of refusing to give such origins a *name* - the desire to wander a certain way without keeping to a path manifests itself once more. How this 'way' differs from the Nietzschean "way" which Derrida nudges us towards at the end of "Structure, Sign and Play", we shall examine soon.

In the sermon *In hoc appertuit caritas dei*, Eckhart writes: "...as long as you work for the sake of God or heaven or eternal bliss, from without, you are at fault." (... *al die wîle dû dîniu werk wûrkest umbe himelrîche oder umbe got oder umbe dîn êwige saelicheit von ûzen zuo, sô ist dir waerlîche unreht*).⁵¹ Everything which is done with an end in mind is "at fault", even if that end is pleasing God. If such is the case, how *should* the soul produce good works? Once again, Eckhart's prescription for all our actions lies in a description of the divine:

...if one were to let a horse run about in a green meadow...it would be the horse's nature to pour forth its strength in leaping about the meadow. This would be a joy to it and in accordance with its own routine...It is a joy to [God] to pour out His nature and His being completely into His likeness...⁵²

Just as the horse's movement is in no way premeditated or motivated but simply an expression of its energy, so the "good man"'s actions must be a consequence of what he is, and not a purposeful striving towards some idealized state. It is a movement of 'excess' and 'overflowing' which Eckhart is fond of repeating in his sermons ("life lives from its own ground, and gushes forth from its own" ...*wan leben lebet ûzer*

⁴⁹ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p146

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p238 from the sermon *Renovamini Spiritu* - Largier, Predigt 83, 194

⁵¹ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, p117- Sermon 5b in Quint 1:90-91

⁵² Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p126, from the sermon *Qui audit me*

*sînem eigenen grunde und quillet ûzer sînem eigen*⁵³), a movement which conveys the goallessness of divine actions and depicts them as the effects of an ebullience, not the means to a de-spiritualizing end.

Eckhart's aversion towards the justification of one's actions - a justification which, inevitably, must have recourse to some kind of theological/metaphysical structure - does seem to veer a way from the more orthodox understanding of "good works". It is certainly no surprise that a number of scholars have seen in Eckhart's *sunder warumbe* an anticipation of Luther⁵⁴ - and equally no surprise that, amongst the various charges of heresy brought against Eckhart at his trial, number eighteen reads: "Let us offer up fruits not of external works, which cannot make us good, but of internal works..".⁵⁵ However, despite the proximity with which Eckhart's *sunder warumbe* brings us towards the rather tired Protestant/catholic debate over his writings, Eckhart's desire to see our actions not as conceptually-motivated (and therefore result-orientated) but rather as the spontaneous effects of a divine play within us, does bring to mind a point Raoul Mortley makes towards the end of his 1986 work on Greek and Christian negation, *From Word to Silence*. Beginning with the remark that there is no "formal *via negativa* in the Christian thought of antiquity"⁵⁶, Mortley portrays the *via negativa* as a response to "the progressive Hellenization of Christianity". Mortley, we must remember, is talking about the classical *via negativa* - the orthodox version of negative theology which is seen as a corrective to the language of affirmative theology. As Christianity became Hellenized, "Greek intellectual problems" such as 'What is God?' (problems which, as Mortley rightly observes, are never mentioned in the Gospels) began to emerge as the thought of Christian antiquity slowly acquired an intellectual vocabulary. Thus Christian thought came to be dominated by a Hellenic, essence-seeking ontology. In

⁵³ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, p118 - Sermon 5b in Quint 1:92

⁵⁴ Evidence shows that Luther knew of Eckhart's ideas through the sermons of his pupil, Johannes Tauler. There are, of course, scholars such as Kelley who passionately disagree with any kind of pro-Reformation reappropriation of Eckhart: "...to claim that Eckhart anticipated the theology of the Protestant Reformers, as some have asserted, is wholly mistaken and based on prejudice." C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) p49

⁵⁵ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, 256, taken from Clark's translation of the Trial documents. This particular article, however, was not condemned but only considered to be 'suspicious of heresy'.

⁵⁶ Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn: Hannstein, 1986) vol 2, p274

this respect, Eckhart's attempt to bypass onto-theological metaphysics - his reluctance to tread the narrow path of doctrine and concept, his desire to love God non-mentally - could be seen as an attempt to return to this pre-Hellenic state of Christianity, one in which faith would be the simple expression of what one is, and not the result of intellectual reflections.

Of course, Derrida would doubtless see this attempt to return to a 'purer', concept-free epoch of Christian experience, uncontaminated by Greek metaphysics, as just another logocentric delusion, similar to the Rousseauistic myth of innocence Levi-Strauss falls victim to when he feels he has 'corrupted' a tribe by introducing them to writing. From a deconstructionist point of view, Christian *experience* - be it 'pre' or 'post' Hellenic - will always involve a metaphysics of presence. For Derrida, all of Eckhart's wanderings - even at their most aimless - will ultimately have a destination.

3.1.3 Derridean Errancy: the "joyous wandering of the graphein"

The question of writing could be opened only if the book was closed. The joyous wandering of the *graphein* then became wandering without return.

*La question de l'écriture ne pouvait s'ouvrir qu'à livre fermé. L'errance joyeuse du graphein alors était sans retour.*⁵⁷

If Eckhart sees wandering as an imitation of the unnameably divine, then Derrida sees errancy as a response to the unmasterable text. Peregrinary motifs run throughout Derrida's work; wandering texts, errant signifiers, signs gone astray, uncertain points of departure, indifference towards destinations. Topographically, the images are juggled - sometimes we wander amidst the uncertain play of the world, sometimes an uncertain future wanders towards us. At times Derrida's terms are descriptive, at times prescriptive: some passages depict 'wandering' as the ineluctable fate of all communication, others extol it not just as a consequence of the instability of the sign but as the only way of confronting positively the unpredictable 'play' of the world.

⁵⁷ *Writing and Difference* p294,429

Having examined Eckhart's use of the peregrinary, what remains now is to understand Derrida's own re-consideration of the errant - exactly how Derrida both describes and prescribes the errant - and then, finally, to see how analogous both writers' treatment of "joyous wandering" actually are.

The 'Naturally' Errant Text.

What does the verb 'to wander' mean in Derrida's texts? What place does the peregrinary motif have in Derrida's works (if the question is not oxymoronic)? Might not such an acknowledgement of the errant, the wayward, constitute an ironic blind spot in the fabric of Derrida's texts, a semantic uncertainty about where Derrida's texts will finally 'end up'? If 'dissemination' means never being able to control the future of a text, how can Derrida - the theorist with something to say - affirm such a precarious state of affairs?

The motif of wandering and its various synonyms and resonances in Derrida (deviation, errant, floating, orphaned, overflow, adventurous excess) occur so frequently that one risks lapsing into a concordance whilst simply trying to chart them. Perhaps a glance at five or six brief examples will be enough to provide the beginnings of an enquiry:

...language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness... (*Of Grammatology* , p6)

Like the desert and the city, the forest, in which the fearful signs swarm, doubtless articulates the non-place and the wandering, the absence of prescribed routes...(*Writing and Difference* , p72)

The Socratic word does not wander, stays at home, is clearly watched...(*Dissemination* , p124)

This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't amount to much, is like all ghosts: errant...Wandering in the streets, he doesn't even know who he is...(*Dissemination* , p143)

...the wandering of the language always richer than knowledge, the language always capable of the movement which takes it further than peaceful and sedentary certitude.(*Writing and Difference* , p73)

The return is a moment of wandering...(*Writing and Difference* , p295)

There is a certain risk , of course, in plucking these sentences out of their original con-texts, straddling them alongside one another in unfamiliar company - a risk

which Derrida, reader of Jabès (“How can I say what I know/ with words whose signification / is multiple?” *Comment dire ce que je sais / avec des mots dont la signification / est multiple?*⁵⁸) is all too familiar with. Nevertheless, a number of points need to be made: first and foremost, Derrida is talking about texts. The text which wanders not *simply* because there is nothing to tie it to its origin, but because one cannot account for the future of its hermeneutics. No-one can say what kind of readers it will ‘bump’ into, what appropriations it will suffer, what signs it will evoke, being at “everyone’s disposal”.⁵⁹ Hence Derrida’s oft-cited metaphor of infancy: the text is a child, wandering orphan-like through the world, willing to be adopted by anyone who takes it in.

As a result, wandering subsequently carries within it an ambiguous sense in Derrida, one of both liberty and vulnerability. To wander because we are lost - or because we have finally realised that there never *was* a path, a point of departure, a destination? The impossibility of being ‘lost’ when you have no place to go does not resolve such ambiguity; Derrida mentions words such as ‘menace’ and ‘adrift’ enough times to show he is more than aware of the ambivalence of his motifs.

From the extracts above, two types of wandering slowly begin to emerge, two kinds of errancy which Derrida is dealing with: wandering as the *a priori*, inescapable condition of textuality, and wandering as the *a posteriori*, elected response to such a condition. On the one hand, one is *always already* wandering, one cannot do otherwise: for Derrida, such a fact underlies the illusion of the preface, which forever claims and fails to “announce in the future...the conceptual content or significance...of what will *already* have been written”.⁶⁰ The Nietzschean legacy of this gesture has already been noted: “Every single time that something is done with a purpose in view, something fundamentally different and other occurs.”⁶¹ Here Nietzsche sees all singlemindedness as fundamentally producing an otherness, all ‘purposefulness’ as resulting in an unforeseen alterity. This is why for Derrida even the return constitutes “a moment of wandering” *un moment de l’errance*, a wishful

⁵⁸ *ibid* p73, 110

⁵⁹ *Dissemination*, 144

⁶⁰ *Dissemination*, 7

⁶¹ Nietzsche *Wille zur Macht* 130, *Will to Power* 351 - found in Spivak’s preface to *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) xxiii

homecoming which is 'always already' undermined, partly because 'home' never stays the same, and partly because there never was any 'home' to come back to.

On the other hand, wandering is also proffered in Derrida's early works as a positive gesture, one might even say a more *interesting* gesture, one which is somehow "richer" than the poverty of "peaceful and sedentary certitude".⁶² It is richer to wander than to march: in what would this richness consist? Presumably the peregrinary motif in Derrida is richer than the itinerary because of a certain limitlessness, a refusal to follow a certain route, in favour of that which lies outside it. The desire to wander, as opposed to the desire to journey or to march towards a predetermined goal, indicates an almost aesthetic preference for the possible over the certain, introducing a (for Derrida) problematic dissatisfaction with the immediate and the present, in favour of the unplanned, the unexpected, the yet to be.

Ironically, this is leading us astray from the point: that if wandering is affirmed in Derrida, such an affirmation finds its expression in a certain acknowledgement of instability, in a recognition of the text's inherent errancy - a condition which Derrida has called in several places an "adventure".⁶³ In this sense, the two motifs of wandering in Derrida - the uncontrollability of the unruly text and the 'proper' response to it - merge once more together. Sterne's traveller in *A Sentimental Journey* puts it well: "I think there is a fatality in it - I seldom go to the place I set out for".⁶⁴ Applied to Derrida, what would this mean - that one should desist from naming destinations in order to arrive at them? In a number of passages, Derrida has already hinted that a certain way of thinking about names - be they departures or destinations - is now *obsolete* :

If the preface appears inadmissible today, it is on the contrary because no possible heading can any longer enable anticipation and recapitulation to meet and merge with one another. To lose one's head, to no longer know where one's head is, such is perhaps the effects of dissemination.⁶⁵

The preface is obsolete "today" because the pathway it "announces" can never be followed, will always already have been left, ignored, abandoned. Derrida almost

⁶² *Writing and Difference*, p73

⁶³ see *Dissemination* p54, *Writing and Difference* p292, *Of Grammatology* p8

⁶⁴ Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) p102

⁶⁵ *Dissemination* , p20

implies that there *was* a time when headings could control the trajectory of their contents, when a preface *could* anticipate and recapitulate the body of work it preceded (and post-dated), when the moment of return was *not* necessarily a moment of wandering. If such a time ever existed, it would surely be the naive, faithful, pre-Nietzschean epoch alluded to in "Structure, Sign and Play", the epoch which existed up until the "event" of the "rupture" - before "language invaded the universal problematic" and "everything became discourse" (*tout devient discours*).⁶⁶ For Derrida, the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the Freudian critique of self-presence and the Heideggerian *Destruktion* of onto-theology have set us free (or condemned us) to wander; the preface and the signpost are now nothing more than the tokens of an obsolete way of thinking, one which naively refuses to think "the structurality of structure"⁶⁷ and pretends to itself that one can actually stop wandering and *go* somewhere.

To recap: Derrida proffers a scenario in which, after a certain series of irreversible gestures, a form of wandering is seen as the fate of all textuality. The itinerary has dissolved into the peregrinary - rather like Sterne's sentimental traveller, no matter how purposefully the text sets out for one destination, it always ends up somewhere else. The preface becomes an ironic comment on where the text would have *liked* to arrive. Derrida's call, therefore, to abandon the hopes of the preface, to ignore the call of the homeland ("Why should an old name...be retained? Why should the effects of a new meaning ...be dampened by memory?"⁶⁸) does beg the classic question: can one ever *decide* to wander? Can one ever resolve to ramble, without turning one's ramblings into a *telos* themselves?

One can see how, in certain aspects of Derrida, wandering may suddenly become the oblique, may suddenly be appropriated as a means to an end:

Instead of tackling the question or the problem straight on, directly, straightforwardly, which would doubtless be impossible...should we proceed obliquely? I have often done so, even to the point of demanding obliqueness by name...⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Writing and Difference* p280, 411

⁶⁷ *ibid*, p280

⁶⁸ *Dissemination*, p3

⁶⁹ In the essay "Passions: An oblique offering" taken from David Wood(ed), *Derrida : A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)p11

It's easy to anticipate a kind of comic logic here: if we never arrive at the place we set out for, then perhaps we should set out for somewhere we don't want to go. Back to the closet logocentrics of the *via negativa*, as some of Derrida's critics would say. In a sense, the question of whether the 'wandering' motif in Derrida is employed as a strategy - that is, as a purposeful, profitable, 'false' wandering, as opposed to a 'sincere', joyous celebration of the uncertain play of the world - all depends on whether we feel there are certain places Derrida wishes to go. Is Derrida's wandering just a different kind of marching?

Freud certainly had paths he wanted his writings to travel along - as Derrida points out so cleverly in "Coming into One's Own" - and was quick to admonish his followers whenever he saw a text straying from its desired trajectory. In his essay on *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, Derrida examines Freud's paternal hold on his writings, his desire to keep psychoanalysis 'in the family', as it were, not to let any of his texts run about on their own, orphan-like: "...the establishment of a science...should have been able to do without the family name Freud. Or able, at least, to make forgetting that name the necessary condition and the proof that science itself is handed on, passed down".⁷⁰ Comments which, cynically speaking, do cast a somewhat ironic light on way the fortunes of the word 'deconstruction' have disagreeably surprised its author.

The point, however, is not to try and vilify Derrida for some kind of 'contradiction' or 'inconsistency' - thereby lapsing into an all-too-familiar debate - but simply to note how even a writer who wishes to affirm the "irreducible and generative multiplicity" of dissemination⁷¹, who celebrates the writing which is "inaugural", which "does not know where it is going" (*ne sait pas où elle va*)⁷², nevertheless still feels a fear being misunderstood. The question might be better phrased: are there any places Derrida would *not* like his texts to wander? Is there anything he would not like the "generative multiplicity" of his texts to produce?

The notion of risk in Derrida is, in part, an answer to this: to wander is always to risk finding oneself in a place one does not wish to be. Or indeed in no place at all

⁷⁰ taken from Geoffrey Hartmann, *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, p142

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (trans. Alan Bass [London: Athlon, 1987]) p45

- to write, as Derrida says, is to risk meaning nothing. That this possibility is sometimes translated as “risk” and sometimes as “adventure” may suggest not simply an awareness but also an indecision on the part of Derrida regarding the consequences of the joyfully goal-less. This concerns the destiny/destination not only of Derrida’s texts, but of all those other texts, unforgivably capitalized - Society, History, Philosophy - whose eventual unfolding is still uncertain. Writing is, after all, “inaugural”; exactly what it inaugurates, however, cannot be determined, anticipated or recapitulated. As we observed in the previous chapter (Section 2.1.2), towards the end of his essay on “La Différance” Derrida admits to the Heideggerian resonances of his phraseology, whilst making a crucial distinction: if writing does “inaugurate” - or as Heidegger might say, “usher forth” - it is because of a certain nothingness which precedes the act of writing, a nothingness which Derrida is content to call the “unnameable”.⁷³ However suspiciously theological the term may sound, Derrida takes pains to stress how his version of the ‘unnameable’ would *not* be “an ineffable Being which no name could approach” (i.e. Heidegger’s *Sein*) but rather “the play which makes possible nominal effects” (*le jeu qui fait q’il y a des effets nominaux*).⁷⁴ Derrida, in effect, de-theologises Heidegger. If philosophy really is “wander(ing) towards the meaning of its death”⁷⁵, such a wandering would be the consequence of the unstable play of textuality (“The accident or throw of dice that ‘opens’ ...a text”⁷⁶), and not the ‘advance’ and ‘withdrawal’ of some ineffable, transcendent force. The element of risk, therefore, would remain - but manifested in the form of a very un-transcendental textual instability, and not in the unknowable whims of some pseudo-deistic presence. Which means, in the terms of this project, that Derrida’s wandering is a consequence of textual play, and not the coming-forth (*hervorkommen*) and withdrawal (*sich entziehen*) of Being.

Ironically, a moment occurs in “Violence and Metaphysics” where Derrida is keen to defend Heidegger from a perception of danger in his work by evoking the motif of wandering. The charge, made by Levinas, is a familiar one - that

⁷² *Writing and Difference* p11, 22

⁷³ *Writing and Difference*, p293

⁷⁴ *Margins of Philosophy* p26, 28

⁷⁵ *Writing and Difference* p79

⁷⁶ *Dissemination*. p54

Heidegger's eschatology of Being, not to mention his treatment of the Land and the Dwelling, ultimately serves as "a nationalism or Barrésism" (Derrida's words).⁷⁷ In Heidegger's defense, Derrida cites his motif of *Irren* - "this thought of interminable wandering" *cette pensée de l'errance interminable*⁷⁸ - as proof of an anti-nationalism in the Heideggerian *oeuvre*, an abandonment of *Heimat* and *Patria* in his texts.

It is interesting that Derrida sees "interminable wandering" as a sufficient antidote to the threat of an "empirical nationalism": wandering not just understood as the loss of centre but also as the death of the capacity to tyrannize. Wandering cannot threaten, is by no means territorial, has no claim to stake. To wander is to affirm one's non-attachment to any kind of -ism, to celebrate one's detachment (*Gelassenheit*) from goals, motivations, origins. The ambiguity of the as yet unnameable, however ominous, is still preferable to the tyranny of the already named:

Can one not affirm the non-referral to the centre, rather than bemoan the absence of the centre? Why would one mourn for the centre? Is not the centre, the absence of play and difference, another name for death? The death which reassures and appeases, but also, with its hole, creates anguish and puts at stake?

*Ne peut-on affirmer l'irréfrence au centre au lieu de pleurer l'absence du centre? Pourquoi ferait-on son deuil du centre? Le centre, l'absence du jeu et de différence, n'est-ce pas un autre nom de la mort? Celle qui rassure, apaise mais de son trou anguisse et aussi met en jeu?*⁷⁹

To wander means to abandon assurance, to never know where one is going. Derrida seems willing to acknowledge that the pilgrimage always provided a kind of comfort, an assurance that one was not lost. At the same time, however, there was also the "anguish" of never arriving, the negative re-description of everything that stood between the pilgrim and his goal as 'obstacle', 'distraction', 'temptation'. To "bemoan the absence of centre" means to constantly view everything in the light of such an absence - to see wherever we are as a prelude to the illusory destination which forever recedes before us. To wander, ultimately, is to affirm life, to affirm the uncertainty of life: to journey, to resist this uncertainty, is to seek death - a death, paradoxically, which one can never experience.

⁷⁷ *Writing and Difference* p145

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p145

⁷⁹ *ibid* p297, 432

3.1.4 .The Affirmation of the Errant: Junctures and Disjunctures.

Therefore, two versions of errancy are being extolled: one in which a theology of justifications and motivations is displaced by a unique *specie* of spiritual voluntarism, and another in which a philosophy of *presence* and explications is no longer a sufficient response to the errant play of textuality. Two versions of centrelessness are being proffered: one in which the onto-theological ‘God’ is abandoned in favour of a ‘God beyond God’, another in which the very *concept* of the centre is replaced by an “a-centricity”. Two variants of an analogous distrust towards the ‘path’ are being examined: one which sees the path as never leading to a God Whom no path can reach, a path which risks becoming in itself the sole object of the pilgrim’s devotions, and a pathlessness which sees all attempts to follow a path as a futile (and potentially violent) gesture towards an illusory (and potentially tyrannical) destination.

To what extent are these two vocabularies of the peregrinary analogous? How far does the Eckhartian wanderer resemble Derrida’s “destinerrant indirection”?⁸⁰ How is the “openness” extolled by both writers towards the text and towards the Godhead constituted? Would such openness “absolutely welcome” (to use Levinas’ phrase) the same things? Would it share the same concerns?

Of course, before embarking upon a final comparison of Derridean and Eckhartian errancy in this section, one point must be made clear: it is not the aim of this chapter to try and transform a thirteenth century Dominican into some kind of Nietzschean ‘philosopher of the dangerous perhaps’ (*Philosophen des gefaerlichen Vielleichts*).⁸¹ Eckhart, for all his innovation, is still writing in a cultural context that simply cannot be dismissed, a context which requires “recognition” and “respect” in order to provide, in that famous phrase from *Of Grammatology*, an “indispensable guardrail” for our investigations.⁸² All of which does not mean that a comparison

⁸⁰ from the essay “Passions” in Wood, *Derrida: A Critical Reader* p24

⁸¹ from *Jenseits von Gut und Boese*, sec. 2

⁸² *Of Grammatology*, p158

cannot be made, and that a certain occasionally striking resemblance cannot obtain, within a freer perspective, a similarity which may well prove more than superficial.

Perhaps the main similarity between the two vocabularies is the idea that any kind of 'attachment' to a centralizing point of reference, a 'centre' which would orchestrate a series of both motivations and justifications for all our actions, is both illusory and obstructive. For both Eckhart and Derrida, one cannot truly wander whilst one is still attached to this centre. In Eckhart, this clearly means that one cannot breakthrough to the Godhead whilst one is still chained to a concept of 'God':

The soul must exist in a free nothingness. That we should forsake God is altogether what God intends, for as long as the soul has God, knows God and is aware of God, she is far from God...this is the greatest honour that the soul can pay to God, to leave God to Himself and to be free of Him.⁸³

In order to obtain this state of "free nothingness", the soul must separate itself from a certain 'God', the God of onto-theology. The freedom which Eckhart speaks of cannot be reached as long as there are images or names to restrict the parameters of one's wanderings. In order for the soul to unite with the Godhead, 'God' must be absent. In his essay on Jabès, Derrida sees this absence as a silence, the silence of a Creator which allows His creation to speak:

God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak, in order to astonish and interrogate us. He did so not by speaking but by keeping still...This difference, this negativity in God is our freedom...

*Dieu s'est séparé de soi pour nous laisser parler, nous étonner et nous interroger. Il l'a fait non pas en parlant mais en se taisant...Cette différence, cette négativité en Dieu, c'est notre liberté...*⁸⁴

Derrida leaves us in no doubt as to what this freedom constitutes - *écriture* :

Writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of separation.

*L'écriture est le moment du désert comme moment de la Séparation.*⁸⁵

Just as one can only wander in the absence of 'God', one can only write in his silence. That is, one can only begin to write when one is separated from God - and

⁸³ Davies, *Selected Writings*, p244

⁸⁴ *Writing and Difference* p67, 103

⁸⁵ *ibid*, p68, 104

here, the *écriture* Derrida refers to is the open text of the poet, not the closed book of the rabbi. Derrida calls writing “the moment of the desert”, the very same image Eckhart uses for the Godhead beyond God (Eckhart’s word for desert is *einoede*). For both Eckhart and Derrida, separation from ‘God’ - the detachment from the centre - is a necessary prerequisite for the freedom (*liberté* and *vriheit*) both writers speak of. The freedom to wander for both writers only begins through the abandonment of a concept of ‘God’ which would govern and orientate all our actions and thoughts. And it is in the meaning of this freedom, and the motivation of its desire, that the real differences between Eckhart and Derrida begin to make themselves manifest.

Exactly why should the centre be abandoned? In both writers, the motivations behind this ‘event’ are different: Eckhart detaches himself from a concept of ‘God’ in order to achieve union with a “God beyond God”. In this sense, wandering is understood as an essentially *spiritual* gesture, as opposed to an aesthetic or an ethical one, a gesture which does not lead away from God, but only from a false and limiting conception of God: “When I said that God was not a Being and was above Being, I did not truly contest His Being, but on the contrary attributed to him a more elevated Being” (*Quasi stella matutina*).⁸⁶ By no means a ‘death of God’ theology (indeed, more a ‘birth of God’ theology), it is not surprising that Derrida sees this gesture as remaining “enclosed in ontic transcendence”.⁸⁷ From such a perspective, Eckhart’s wandering is no wandering, but simply the return of the Hegelian *réleve* to its satisfying conclusion.

This would be an unfair judgement, as Derrida himself has increasingly begun to admit.⁸⁸ One could see Eckhart’s wandering as the abandonment of the name in favour of namelessness, of the Why in favour of whylessness, of finite (earthly) certainty in favour of infinite (divine) uncertainty. Whether one can recover all of this under the label of ‘onto-theology’ all depends on the extent to which the Eckhartian Godhead can be understood as a “transcendental signified”, a familiar question. However, regardless of whether we feel Eckhart’s wandering to be a

⁸⁶ cit. by Derrida in “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” in Coward and Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993)p78

⁸⁷ cit. by Derrida in *Writing and Difference* 146

genuine indication of “unknowing”⁸⁹ or simply a strategy to return to a “more elevated Being”, we should not forget the obvious religious context of the Dominican’s gesture: that Eckhart’s motivations for advocating a ‘centrelessness’, as opposed to Derrida’s, are not primarily aesthetic or even ethical, but spiritual. They lie within the desire to enter into “the mystery of the darkness of the eternal Godhead” (*diu verborgen vinsternisse der ewigen gotheit*).⁹⁰ Eckhart’s wandering is a means of achieving union with such a ‘mystery’.

The suggestion that, first and foremost, Derrida’s advocating of wandering is an aesthetic gesture, and only later an ethical one, does embark upon a reading of the evolution of Derrida’s thought which Derrida himself would not be entirely happy with. Dismayed not only by the thought of a possible “remoralization of deconstruction”, but also by the idea that he is devoting an “increasingly intense attention” in his works to “the fine names of ‘ethics’, ‘morals’, etc”⁹¹, Derrida is keen to avoid lapsing into a “moralism”, and insists that his deconstruction has *always* taken place “in the name of a higher responsibility”.⁹² This insistence of Derrida’s on a continuing and abiding concern with ethics within his works is by no means false – one thinks immediately of his 1964 essay on Levinas. Many of his early essays, however (“Ellipsis”, “Structure, Sign and Play”, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book”), do promote ‘centrelessness’ as a “richer” and more interesting gesture, and not as one necessarily concerned with the tyrannical implications of marching towards a destination.

In his essay on Jabès, Derrida extols the wandering of the poet above the quest of the rabbi. The errant interpretation of the poet, which would “leave speech” in order to be “the diaphanous element of its going forth”⁹³ is contrasted with the rabbinical interpretation of interpretation, one which (to use Alan Bass’ apt phrase) “sees interpretation as an unfortunately necessary road back to an original truth”.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ see “Post-Scriptum”, for example, where Derrida admits to the uncertain location of the “classic frontiers of negative theology” in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) p288

⁸⁹ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, vol.1, p11 from the sermon *Dum medium silentium*

⁹⁰ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p217, from the sermon *Ave gratia plena* - Largier, Predigt 22, 264

⁹¹ “Passions” in Wood, *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, p13

⁹² *ibid.*, p14

⁹³ *Writing and Difference* p70

⁹⁴ *ibid* p311, footnote.3

As we have observed in the previous section, Derrida does seem to find something more exciting in this “seminal adventure of the trace” - not the cloistered, rabbinical quest for the single meaning of a name, but the name as the possibility for an infinity of meanings (“The name must germinate” writes Derrida, quoting Breton, “otherwise it is false”).⁹⁵ The poet exalts the “absence of prescribed routes” which allows him to wander, a wandering which is

always richer than knowledge, the language always capable of the movement
which takes it further than peaceful and sedentary certitude.

*toujours plus riche que le savoir, ayant toujours du mouvement pour aller plus
loin que la certitude paisible et sédentaire.*⁹⁶

The Heideggerian dictum of possibility always being higher than actuality comes to mind here.⁹⁷ For Derrida there seems to be at once something both restrictive and banal about the destination, something sterile and inhibiting about the ‘closure’ of the path. It is an aesthetics of the errant which does not really figure centrally in Eckhart’s motivations for detachment, even though Derrida has remarked elsewhere to the contrary: “I wonder if it isn’t a matter there, beauty or sublimity, of an essential trait of negative theology” (*je me demande s’il ne s’agit pas là, beauté ou sublimité, d’un trait essentiel de la théologie négative*).⁹⁸ Eckhart’s apophatic aversion towards names and destinations, although similar to an aesthetically-motivated preference for the sublime, is ultimately concerned with a truer understanding of what ‘God’ is, and not for the freedom of “a world of signs...without truth”.⁹⁹ In short: Derrida and Eckhart agree on the pathlessness, but not on the Way.

Obstacles to the Wandering Thinker.

What we are now going to do is consider some of the analogous difficulties of Eckhart and Derrida in their attempt to establish a thought of ‘non-destination’.

⁹⁵ *ibid* p72

⁹⁶ *ibid* p73,110

⁹⁷ a remark cited in Thomas Sheehan’s “Reading a Life: Heidegger and Hard Times” in the *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1993)

⁹⁸ “Post-Scriptum” taken in English from Coward and Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p284 and from the French *Sauf le nom* (Paris: éditions galilée, 1993) p17

⁹⁹ *Writing and Difference*, p292

Wandering is not a problem for those who have nothing to say, who do not seek to be understood, who do not care where they arrive. In a sense both Eckhart and Derrida, in their appraisal of uncertainty and resistance towards the certain, do share a common obstacle: that of abandoning the path, and yet simultaneously wanting to go in a certain direction - and do certain things - which could be misconstrued as pursuing such a path to a certain extent. Having expounded upon the unmasterability of God and the text, the response of both theorist and theologian is not simply a mystical silence, nor the passive acceptance of a drifting state. It is an attempt to embark upon a course of action without lapsing into the very names one is trying to leave behind. For Eckhart, this means there is something in the path which prevents one ever arriving:

The more one seeks Thee, the less one can find Thee. You should seek Him in such a way as never to find Him. If you do not seek Him, you will find Him.

*So man dich ie me sūchet, so man dich ie minder vindet. Du solt in suchen, also das du in niena vindest. sūchest du in nīt, so vindest du in.*¹⁰⁰

Eckhart still wants to arrive at a truer understanding of what God is by bypassing “God” - the “God”, as Jean Luc Marion says, “who by his quotation marks is stigmatized as an idol”.¹⁰¹ The paradox of not seeking God in order to find Him obviously brings us back to namelessness: to seek something is to already know what one is looking for, to give it a name. And yet, if we seek a name, we will never find God, who is nameless. If we follow a path somewhere, it will never lead us to God, who is nowhere. What I am going to suggest is that, in Eckhart’s “pathless Way, which is free and yet fixed”, the word “pathless” puts ~~Way~~ under erasure. It enables Eckhart to get to where he wants to go without following a path.

How does this paradoxical advocating of pathlessness and the insistence upon a direction apply to Derrida? Although Derrida, like Eckhart, may be abandoning one version of “God”, this does not mean he is seeking to replace it with another. Any attempt to see the two thinkers’ difficulties as analogous must recognize Derrida as

¹⁰⁰ in Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p245, taken from the sermon *Homo quidam nobilis abiit* - Sermon 15 in Quint 1:253

¹⁰¹ Marion, Jean Luc, “A Relief for Theology” in *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1994) p579

facing certain questions: how can a “thought of interminable wandering”¹⁰² theorize about such wandering without revealing itself to be a goal-orientated, truth-seeking pilgrimage? how can an *écriture* which “does not know where it is going” claim to have any kind of ethical agenda? Questions which constitute two familiar obstacles to the deconstructive enterprise: i) the problem of describing and analysing, in texts and through texts, the unstable nature of all textuality, and ii) the difficulties which lie in re-affirming deconstruction’s much-vaunted synonymity with “justice”¹⁰³ without giving “ammunition to the officials of anti-deconstruction”.¹⁰⁴

Both thinkers, so to speak, have problems in reconciling their pathlessness to their ways. Eckhart is well aware that any attempt to talk about God, even about the ineffability of such a God, is a futile project:

One of our most ancient masters...considered that whatever he could say about things contained in itself something alien and untrue, and therefore he wanted to keep silent.

*unser eltesten meister...den dühte des: allez, daz er sprechen möhte von den dingen, daz daz etwaz vremdes und unwâres in im trüege; dar umbe wolte er swîgen.*¹⁰⁵

Every remark concerning God contains within it something “alien and untrue”, an ineluctable element of falsity which forever undermines any attempt to say “what God really is”. Of course, as Kevin Hart has already pointed out, Eckhart has in mind an original purity of speech here, a pre-lapsarian state of perfectly communicable meaning which our fallen language cannot possibly hope to re-attain. In Derrida, however, the “alien and untrue” element in language which renders the truth-claim obsolete is not the incommensurable but the uncontrollable, as Derrida points out in *Of Grammatology*:

...all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play...¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² *Writing and Difference* p145 - Derrida’s words are actually describing Heidegger’s *Irren*

¹⁰³ see Derrida’s interview, “On Responsibility”, in Midgley(ed), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction* (Coventry: Parousia Press, 1997) particularly p27

¹⁰⁴ “Passions” in Wood, *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, p15

¹⁰⁵ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, p274 - from the sermon *Stetit Jesus in medio* - Largier, Predigt 36a, 386. The ‘ancient master’ referred to is Heraclitus (or at least, Albertus Magnus’ version of Heraclitus)

¹⁰⁶ *Of Grammatology*, 6

It is this ungovernable “play in language” in all critique which is, for Derrida, the disruptive “alien and untrue”, and not some fallen incapacity to convey a transcendental signified. The infinitely divine remains forever out of reach for Eckhart’s words, just as the finite play within the text will forever resist Derrida’s attempts to arrest it. The differences are substantial, although as obstructions they are analogous: the subjects of both writers are implicitly resistant to their discourses.

Analogous obstructions which explain why Derrida feels “the detours, locution and syntax” of deconstruction to which he “will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology”.¹⁰⁷ In a sense, both Derrida and Eckhart’s ‘pathless ways’ are a response to the threatening futility of their projects, an attempt to overcome the “alien and untrue”/ ‘uncontrollable’ in language by continually placing it ‘under erasure’.

The term “sous rature” ultimately comes from Heidegger’s 1956 work *Zur Seinsfrage* (*Towards A Question of Being*). Here Heidegger is trying to reply to Junger’s request for a “good definition of nihilism” (*eine gute Definition des Nihilismus*).¹⁰⁸ Heidegger tells us how “no information [*keine Auskunft*] can be given about nothingness and Being...which can be presented tangibly [*griffbereit vorliegen*] in the form of assertions”. This already sounds like something similar to Eckhart’s paraphrase of Avicenna: “God is a being to whom nothing is, or can be, similar”.¹⁰⁹ Such a problem, insists Heidegger, “leads us into a realm which requires a different language [*der ein anderes Sagen verlangt*]”.¹¹⁰ In such a realm, Being could only ever be written as ~~Being~~, just as Eckhart’s God can only ever be spoken of as ~~God~~. Such a crossing out (*Durchkreuzung*) is not merely negative, not simply a reminder of what one cannot say, but also a pointer towards how much infinitely remains to be said. Spivak is quite correct in her remark concerning the different things Heidegger and Derrida put “under erasure”. Whereas Heidegger’s ~~Being~~ refers to an “inarticulable presence”, Derrida’s concept of the ~~trace~~ indicates rather

¹⁰⁷ *Margins of Philosophy* p6

¹⁰⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage* (London: Vision Press, 1974) p80

¹⁰⁹ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p179

¹¹⁰ *Zur Seinsfrage*, p81

“the absence of a presence, an always already absent present”.¹¹¹ In Derrida, words are placed under erasure because of a restless play within language, and not because of some semantic inability to express an elusive signified ‘out-there’. Semantic instability - that is, radical indeterminacy within *finite* parameters of play - makes such *Durchkreuzung* necessary, not the presence of some ineffable unsignifiable which constantly makes us lament how ‘finite’ and ‘imperfect’ our language is.

This textual strategy of forever deleting the validity of one’s assertions as soon as they are written - but nevertheless retaining the gesture that one has deleted - can be seen most explicitly in Eckhart’s careful attempt to detach one’s ‘good’ actions from ‘goodness’ (“To be free of virtue is the perfection of virtue”¹¹²) - that is, from a value-laden vocabulary of external practices, a conceptual system which can have no place within the image-less non-space of the Godhead:

St Augustine says: God is wise without wisdom, good without goodness, powerful without power.¹¹³

It is a passage which Derrida obviously finds interesting, referring to it as he does in two different essays.¹¹⁴ At first, there seems to be something of the absurd in Eckhart’s paraphrase of Augustine - the desire for a wise, loving, omnipotent God who is nevertheless free of all names. However, such a detachment of the singular from the general, of the gesture or word from the very vocabulary which would transform such gestures and words into *examples* and *characteristics*, is consistent with Eckhart’s apophatic aversion towards the concept. Concepts can ultimately have no truck with God - they ‘fill up’ the soul when it should be empty, they give the soul destinations when it should be wandering, they take up that space in the soul which should be “potential receptivity”.¹¹⁵ Derrida, interestingly, sees something akin to his own project in Eckhart’s use of Augustine’s phrase:

In the same word and in the same syntax it transforms into affirmation its purely phenomenal negativity, which ordinary language, riveted to finitude, gives us to

¹¹¹ preface to *Of Grammatology*, p xviii

¹¹² Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p243

¹¹³ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p206, taken from the sermon *Quasi stella matutina* - Eckhart is citing Augustine’s *De Trinitate* (albeit inaccurately), V, ch 1, n.2

¹¹⁴ In “How To Avoid Speaking :Denials” (1989) - found in Foshay and Coward, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p78 - and in “Post-Scriptum” (1992), also found in the same volume, p287

¹¹⁵ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p224

understand in a word such as *without*, or in other analogous words. It deconstructs grammatical anthropomorphism.¹¹⁶

Derrida seems to recognise Eckhart's difficulties here: the difficulty which lies in the desire to attribute 'goodness' - and not 'evil' or 'indifference' - to a divine and unspeakable hyperessentiality, in a language which is "riveted to finitude" and thereby continually runs the risk of lapsing into a "grammatical anthropomorphism". The possibility of affirmative theology 'anthropomorphising' a nameless deity is, of course, one of the classic *raisons d'être* of negative theology. The desire to affirm the goodness and wisdom of an ultimately unnameable God without humanising Him (sic), cannot escape a certain analogy with deconstruction and its attempt to affirm the "responsibility" of unnameable *différance* without turning it into a humanism. Derrida seems to feel the Augustinian 'without' succeeds in deconstructing this potential anthropomorphism, at least in part - God is ~~wise~~, ~~good~~, ~~powerful~~. Is Derrida making a similar claim about deconstruction - that it is ~~ethical~~, ~~just~~, ~~humanitarian~~? To what extent is the same kind of erasure at work?

Three years later, in a briefer and much more guarded reference to Augustine's assertion Derrida writes in "Post-Scriptum":

Meister Eckhart cites [Augustine] often; he often cites the 'without' of St Augustine, that quasi-negative predication of the singular without concept, for example: "God is wise without wisdom..."

*Mâitre Eckhart le cite souvent, il cite souvent le "sans" de saint Augustin, cette prédication quasi négative du singulier sans concept, par exemple: "Dieu est sage sans sagesse...."*¹¹⁷

The Augustinian deconstruction of "grammatical anthropomorphism" has become the *almost* negative gesture of the apophatic. An "apophatic boldness"¹¹⁸ whose Christian version, although always inclining towards Godlessness (as Leibniz remarked), will never *completely* negate God without re-affirming Him beyond such negations. After having underlined the deconstructive nature of Augustine's "without" in "Denials", Derrida's slightly more reserved comment in "Post-Scriptum" (in itself a response to a Jerusalem conference linking Derrida with the

¹¹⁶ "Denials", *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p79

¹¹⁷ "Post-Scriptum" in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p287 - *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Éditions galilée, 1993) p27

corpus of various negative theologies) omits reference to any kind of alliance with deconstruction, choosing instead to infer how Augustine *almost* (but never quite) manages to sever the singular from the concept, the 'good' from 'goodness'.

Of course, the vast question of the relationship between 'ethics' and 'deconstruction' far exceeds the parameters of this final section, and will be dealt with more directly in Chapter Four. All that is of interest to us at the moment is how the attempts of both writers to re-establish the 'ethicity' of their apophatic /deconstructive discourses are fraught with analogous problems and potentially interfere with a 'pathless' thought. Derrida's remarks on Augustine's 'without' tell us that, if deconstruction really is 'caring' without 'charity', 'ethical' without 'ethics', 'just' without a conception of 'rights', then it puts these adjectives - and the concepts they refer to - under erasure for reasons which are radically different from those of Augustine /Eckhart. Unlike God's 'goodness' and 'wisdom', which are negated - or quasi-negated - because of a certain "finitude", Derrida seems to place 'ethics', 'morality' and 'humanism' under erasure because *they no longer have any metaphysical ground*. They are simply signs, names, marks, noises, "riveted" not so much to a mortal finitude but to a metaphysics of illusory self-presence. Eckhart puts 'goodness' under erasure because such a term can never adequately express the divine, hyper-essential 'goodness' that cannot be spoken of. Derrida, on the other hand, puts words like 'morality' under erasure not in favour of some infinitely perfect, super-morality yet to be grasped, but because of the never-ending play of absences and presences within the word 'morality' which always already deconstructs it. Therefore, although both writers embark upon pathless Ways, they do not feel their Ways to be pathless for quite the same reasons.

Of course, one could quickly cite a minor objection to this difference between the Eckhartian and Derridean versions of *sous rature*. As we have seen, Derrida's claim that negative theology belongs to the very "onto-theological promise it seems

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, p284

to break”¹¹⁹ always seems to involve Eckhart’s words (I quote Derrida’s French translation of the phrase):

When I said that God was not a Being, and was above Being, I did not truly contest His Being, but on the contrary attributed to Him *a more elevated Being*. [italics mine]

*Quand j’ai dit que Dieu n’était pas un être et était au-dessus de l’être, je ne lui ai pas par là contesté l’être, au contraire je lui ai attribué un être plus élevé.*¹²⁰

Eckhart is out to reassure, keen as ever to veer his writings away from that very *Gottlosigkeit* Leibniz felt unsettled by. Derrida sees this as a re-joining, a re-affirming at a higher level of the *ov* in onto-theology. To what extent can a similar operation of reassurance be detected in Derrida’s “Passions”? Derrida insists that if he has deconstructed ‘ethicity’...

...it is in the name of a higher responsibility and a more intractable moral exigency that I have declared my distaste, uneven as it may be, for both moralisms.(p14)¹²¹

Can we ever reassure without being re-appropriated? If Derrida contested the “ethicity” of ethics, was it in the name of a more elevated ethics? The qualifying adjective ‘higher’ is interesting: does this mean ‘out of reach’? yet to be grasped? above that “finitude” which our language is “riveted” to? What is, ultimately, the difference between Derrida’s “higher responsibility” and Eckhart’s “more elevated Being”? A more hostile critic would see the Derridean suspicion of Eckhart’s qualifying re-assurance as a clear case of Freudian self-projection, the projecting of one’s own logocentric lapses onto the writings of another. However, the word “intractable” (*intraitable*), with its suggestion of ‘unmanageable’, ‘ungovernable’, does lead us back to a more familiar Derridean vocabulary, one which would link the unnameable name of this “higher responsibility” with a semantic indeterminacy, rather than a theological inexpressibility.

As we have seen, both Eckhart and Derrida embark upon pathless Ways, ways which wander in different directions, for different reasons, with different results. Although both writers reject the idea of a path, Eckhart’s *wec* is abandoned because

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, p310

¹²⁰ *cit. in Writing and Difference* p146, 217

there are no destinations which can indicate the “God beyond God”, a God beyond topography. Derrida’s *chemin*, on the other hand, is rejected because it is always already abandoned, because it becomes an illusion the moment it is announced. We have, therefore, two examples of a centreless ‘wandering thought’ with ultimately different desires: the Eckhartian soul wandering because it seeks to imitate the ebullient divine and finally obtain “oneness with the Father” (*einunge sînes vaters*),¹²² and the Derridean text erring, blissfully free of any “centre of absolute anchoring”¹²³, because it wishes to embrace a freedom which only the “absence of prescribed routes” can provide.¹²⁴

“The only true joy is the joy of loss,” writes Altizer.¹²⁵ The loss of all the reasons why we feel we have to say things, write things, do things. The loss of all the places we feel we have to go to. In Eckhart, one loses an idol, a sense of self and a shallow theology; in Derrida, one loses a restrictive metaphysics of presence, an oppressive nostalgia and a centre which can no longer command. Although both gestures are separated by centuries, are radically rooted in disparate vocabularies, they remain nevertheless similar gestures of liberation, however differently understood. Both writers discern the importance of remaining ‘open’ and ‘empty’, which in Eckhart takes the form of a “potential receptivity” towards God, a God who *must* respond to such openness:

As for what it profits you to pursue this possibility, to keep yourself empty and bare...it contains the chance to gain Him who is all things...It would surely be a grave defect in God if He performed no great works in you whenever He found you this empty and bare.¹²⁶

In Derrida, Eckhart’s ‘emptiness’ towards God translates itself into an ‘openness’ towards the Other and towards the future:

¹²¹ “Passions” in David Wood (ed), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, p14

¹²² Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, vol 2, p11 from the sermon *Qui mihi ministrat* - Largier, Predigt 58, 620

¹²³ *Margins of Philosophy* p320

¹²⁴ *Writing and Difference* p73

¹²⁵ taken from “History as Apocalypse” in Thomas J. Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1982)

¹²⁶ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, vol 1., p42-43 from the sermon *Et cum factus esset*

What I call messianicity without messianism refers to the promise of someone or something to come in such a way that does not anticipate at all what or who will come, when or where. An absolute openness to what is coming.¹²⁷

If wandering is ultimately understood as a kind of 'openness' towards whatever lies before one, a willingness to go anywhere, then we can begin to understand how the absence of destinations in both writers ultimately translates itself into an absence of motivations, and therefore of justifications. Both extracts propose the dismantling of all preconceptions of the other (be it 'God' or 'future' or 'neighbour'), the removal of all anticipations of where one is likely to arrive. Within both extracts, we see two versions of a thought of 'non-destination', a thought which extols openness towards a space ultimately resistant to all names, icons and speculations. In the next chapter, we shall explore this Eckhartian/Derridean theme of openness to the Other more fully, delineating its relationship towards the understanding of uncertainty as a kind of non-violence, and questioning the extent to which an ethics of *Gelassenheit* in Eckhart/Derrida can ever really let Beings be. For now, it suffices to re-emphasize how both Eckhart and Derrida, as Altizer might have said, recognize that the loss of the destination is a cause for celebration, not lamentation, and the condition for a new kind of understanding, not an all-too-familiar state of mourning.

¹²⁷ Midgley, *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, p3

3.2 Vagrancy and Whylessness in *The Caretaker* : Pinter's Version of the *Sunder Warumbe* .

I wouldn't know a symbol if I saw one.

- Pinter, cit. in Knowles, *Text and Performance* , p13

We have seen, in the previous section, how both Eckhart and Derrida extol the wanderer over the pilgrim. In Eckhart, to wander joyfully is a consequence of blissful union with the Godhead; to perform good works spontaneously, free of all motivation and premeditation, is to imitate the divine. In Derrida, the errancy of the text is celebrated as liberating and "adventurous", the emancipation of the signifier from its signified. In *The Caretaker*, however, wandering only seems to bring desperation and terror to the wanderer. The aim of this section is to show how the joyful errancy in negative theology and deconstruction finds a darker counterpart in the anguished homelessness of *The Caretaker*. Again, the 'whyless' spontaneity of another's actions, advocated by both Eckhart and Derrida as 'Godly' and 'authentic', manifests itself in Pinter as a means for unpredictable violence and groundless malice.

"Homelessness becomes a world destiny," writes Heidegger.¹ To begin our study of *The Caretaker* with such a quote suggests yet another existentialist reading of Pinter's play, underlining the solitary anguish of Davies' *Dasein*, the precariousness of his situation, the fragility of his sense of identity, the unpredictability of human relationships...a category of readings Knowles has mockingly summed up as "Modern Man in Search of His Insurance Cards".²

Nevertheless, *The Caretaker* is of relevance to our project inasmuch that it concerns a homeless wanderer, whose ramblings have no apparent destination, and two brothers, whose conflicting behaviour has no apparent motivation. However, instead of concentrating on the existentialist resonances of Pinter's play, which - although manifold - are already well-documented, this section will have two aims. Firstly, to show exactly where the uncertainty of *The Caretaker* lies - both through

¹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" cit in David Krell (ed), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978) p220

² Michael Scott(ed), *Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming*, Macmillan Casebook Series (London : Macmillan, 1986) p247

the drifting, plotless movement of the play's dénouement, and through the mysterious benevolence/ hostility of the two brothers who 'befriend' the homeless tramp Davies, their inconsistent treatment of him and the enigmatic possibilities of their 'faint' smiles at the end of the play. Secondly, to propose a re-reading of *The Caretaker* exclusively concerned with the issue of textuality, a reading which sees Davies' sufferings at the hands of the two brothers as analogous to the (mis)fortunes of the text, which wanders vulnerably from one reader to another, forever uncertain of how it is going to be (mis)appropriated next. Such an approach will serve to elicit how the themes of wandering and whylessness, understood as positive and spiritually generative in Eckhart and Derrida, seems to bring out, from the barrenness of Pinter's various landscapes, only vulnerability, anguish and dismay.

3.2.1 Disagreements over *The Caretaker* .

Before examining *The Caretaker*, it might be worthwhile briefly surveying the critical response to the play, in particular the various points and issues within its numerous performances which seemed to have stirred up dissent amongst the critics. First and foremost among such critical aporia within *The Caretaker* is the problem of Davies, and how to react to him - helpless object of pathos or twisted, vindictive old tramp? Davies' ugly streak of racial prejudice, exhibited in the first minutes of the play, wins him little favour with the audience: "...I couldn't find a seat, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it".³ Such ingrained and malicious xenophobia, blended together with a willingness to cheat and steal from the first simpleton naive enough to trust him, is enough to convince critics like Esslin that Davies' torment is ultimately brought on by himself. Davies, confronted by the social "inadequacy" of Aston, cannot help exploiting his benefactor - thus displaying the stupid, arrogant pride that, for Esslin, is "the *hybris* of Greek tragedy which becomes the cause of Davies' downfall".⁴ Morrison takes a similarly unforgiving view of Davies' "underlying viciousness" and "parasitism", rather unproblematically painting Mick as the Caring Brother, who succeeds in

³ p17 - all references to *The Caretaker* are taken from *Pinter Plays: Two* (London: Methuen 1977)

revealing to Aston the “true nature” of the dishonest vagrant he has unwittingly let into their house.⁵ Even John Pesta, in an otherwise even-handed treatment of the play, sees Davies as another one of “Pinter’s Usurpers” and correspondingly feels the “blame...lies chiefly with Davies”.⁶

Other critics have tended to feel a little more cynical towards Pinter’s alleged comment on the play - “It’s about love”⁷ - a cynicism which ranges from a definite distrust of Aston (Knowles) to a full-blown demand for empathy with Davies’ lot (Minogue). Boulton relates to Davies as a symbol of “present day humanity” embarking upon an “uncertain road” with “no certain destination”⁸, Ruby Cohn interprets Davies’ sufferings in *The Caretaker* as “the virtual annihilation of an individual”⁹ and Trussler, who sees Davies as an “almost pathetically predictable” figure, voices his own suspicions about a “pre-arranged plot” on the brothers’ part.¹⁰ Valerie Minogue’s essay is by far the most impassioned defence of Davies, seeing in the tramp, as he tries to curry favour first with one brother, then with the other, our own “vain efforts to discover exactly ... ‘which way the wind is blowing’”.¹¹ All these readings, in one way or another, see Davies as a desire for certainty and refuge, caught helplessly adrift in an uncertain world.

Equally, critical opinion is divided on the best way to evaluate Aston’s role in *The Caretaker*. Some critics see Aston as nothing more than a good-natured version of an idiot savant - a figure of “quiet charitableness and tolerance” writes Almansi/Henderson, unaware of “the menace all around him”.¹² In Esslin the simpleton takes on a more artistic air, who enjoyed “a life of heightened sensibility and imagination” before being “reduced” to the shell that he is through the shock therapy forced upon him.¹³ Trussler, on the other hand, paints a more indecisive Aston, torn between his sympathy for the tramp and loyalty towards his brother.

⁴ Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, (London: Methuen, 1970) p99

⁵ Kristin Morrison, *Canter and Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) p164-5

⁶ “Pinter’s Usurpers” in Arthur Ganz(ed), *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972) p128

⁷ confided to Charles Marowitz, in Scott(ed), Macmillan Casebook, p164

⁸ Ganz, *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p101

⁹ “The World of Harold Pinter” in Ganz, *Pinter*, p78

¹⁰ Simon Trussler, *The Plays of Harold Pinter* (London: Gollancz, 1973) p82

¹¹ “Taking Care of the Caretaker” in Ganz, *Pinter*, p76

¹² Guido Almansi and S. Henderson, *Harold Pinter* (London: Methuen, 1983) p55

Cohn, moving a step further in her defence of Davies, focuses on Aston's final, cold-hearted refusal of the old man's plea to stay, ultimately seeing "only surface contrasts" between Mick and Aston "in their attitudes towards the old man".¹⁴

Knowles, finally, sees Aston as a mentally-damaged figure "haunted by revenge" and intent upon "vindicating himself and impugning those who have harmed him".¹⁵

From innocent dimwit to vengeful psychopath, the characters in *The Caretaker* are uncertain enough to provoke a variety of responses.

Another issue which seems to provoke dissent among the critical readership of *The Caretaker* is the extent to which 'signs' in the play must necessarily be considered 'symbols'. It is a debate which, as Hinchliffe relates, was in part provoked by a reply Pinter made to an observation of Rattigan's: "When Rattigan saw [the play] as an allegory about the God of the Old Testament, the God of the New Testament, and Humanity, Pinter replied that the play was about a caretaker and two brothers".¹⁶ Pinter's dry reductiveness here, however well-intended, is indicative of the artist's stereotypically disparaging attitude towards interpretations - few writers welcome the nailing of their works to fixed and coherent meanings, and Pinter is certainly no exception. Asked what his work was "about", his reply has now become famous: "The weasel under the cocktail cabinet".¹⁷ Knowles writes:

Some views of *The Caretaker*...dumbfounded the playwright, who considered the play simple and straightforward. Psychological interpretation, on the other hand, explained the play in terms of the conflict between the superego, the ego and the Id. In the struggle for private property between the owners and the ownerless, Marxists saw the class war. Alternatively, a theological view allegorised Davies as Everyman, Aston as a Christlike figure and Mick as Satanic!¹⁸

Although Pinter's resistance to ideological appropriations of his work is understandable, his insistence on critics seeing his play as "simple and straightforward", without attempting to construct any kind of reading which might make sense of the bewildering array of sounds and language one encounters during a

¹³ Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound* (London: Methuen, 1970) p106

¹⁴ Ganz, *Pinter*, p92

¹⁵ Scott, Macmillan Casebook, p155

¹⁶ Arnold P.Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1967) p88

¹⁷ Scott, Macmillan Casebook, p9

¹⁸ Ronald Knowles, *Text and Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1988) p13

Pinter play, does seem rather naive. Pinter's insertion of such incongruous elements as the Buddha figure and Aston's visionary "shed" does invite some element of hermeneutics, however distasteful the playwright may find this to be. Can a writer ever insist on his signs *not* being understood as symbols? How could such an insistence ever be reinforced?

Hinchliffe, having acknowledged how "the urge to allegorize is of course reasonable", goes on to declare: "Cosmic implications are out of place in *The Caretaker*....Pinter's tramps do not discuss cosmic matters".¹⁹ Hinchliffe, in his talk of "cosmic matters", seeks to distinguish Pinter's tramps from those of Beckett. Whereas Gogo and Didi discuss memory, suicide and the Gospel of Luke, Aston and Davies merely swap half-mumbled remarks about sleeping habits, leaky roofs and Sidcup. This is enough, for Hinchliffe, to justify Bamber Gascoigne's assertion that Pinter's work "is the very essence of naturalistic drama".²⁰ Although this sounds rather like John Lahr's own identification of Pinter with Chekhov, Lahr at least sees Pinter as using "the conventions of Naturalism to go beyond them".²¹ Hinchliffe's definition of naturalism as a work which excludes any direct treatment of abstract universals is slightly problematic - particularly when one bears in mind the Absurd's preference for the precise, the detail, the particular. If, for a work to have "cosmic implications", a discussion of "cosmic matters" is deemed necessary, then a large number of Kafka's short pieces, notably lacking in any kind of explicitly abstract theme (*Ein Landarzt*, *Der Kuebelreiter*, *Der Schlag ans Hoftor*, *Der Aufbruch*²²) would also fall under the category of "naturalistic". Whereas critics like Dukore see the realistic setting of *The Caretaker* as a springboard towards different ideas of their own, a play which "suggests more than the literal"²³, Hinchliffe is made more cautious by the "wealth of naturalistic detail".²⁴ Despite a favourable consideration of Boulton's own reading of the play, which sees Davies as the archetypal symbol of life as a journey, Hinchliffe still feels that "*The Caretaker* remains obstinately and simply

¹⁹ Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter*, p103, 105

²⁰ *ibid*, p105, quoting Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama*, p54

²¹ "Pinter and Chekhov: The Bond of Naturalism" in Ganz, *Pinter*, p61

²² see Kafka's *Saemtlich Erzaehlungen* (Fischer, 1970)

²³ Bernard Dukore, *Harold Pinter* (London: Macmillan, 1988) p56

²⁴ Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter*, p107

a play about two brothers and a caretaker”, an assertion which simply returns us to the very debate initiated at the beginning of his study.²⁵

3.2.2 The Errancy of Language in *The Caretaker*

The first thing to be said about *The Caretaker* is that, linguistically and thematically, it *sprawls*. Characters ramble on, indifferently, obliquely, stopping only when interrupted by the ramblings of another. Points quickly get lost in misunderstandings, incomplete repetitions and muddled back tracking. Blindingly irrelevant anecdotes and asides suddenly appear in the middle of completely unrelated explanations or interrogations, prompted by a chance association never revealed to the audience. As the errant line of dialogue weaves from moment to moment, topics of conversation follow one another with little or no continuity - jig saws, offers of sex in local cafés, birth places, household plugs...listening to the dialogue of *The Caretaker* is like trying to follow a radio which is constantly changing stations.²⁶

Not surprisingly, a number of critics have drawn attention to the ‘aimless’ feel of the language in *The Caretaker*, a language which is “relatively inarticulate, illogical and oblique, wandering directionless with the signposts of a plot”(Knowles)²⁷ and which contributes to the play’s “related sense of drifting” (Trussler).²⁸ To a lesser extent, the meandering movement of *The Caretaker* is enhanced by the relative openness of the play’s structure. This is not to say that Pinter is as bereft of narrative as Beckett or Robbe-Grillet - *The Caretaker* is still a play with a situation, a complication and a resolution (the decision to evict Davies), a play which develops and whose characters change in a way which Gogo and Didi simply do not. However, characters do wander on and off the stage without warning - Mick’s wordless appearance at the beginning of Act One and closing re-appearance in the final minutes of the same act, the continual entrances and exits of both brothers

²⁵ Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter*, p107

²⁶ A fact which leads one Romanian linguist to observe how Pinter’s plays “are excellent lessons in contemporary spoken English”. Doina Lecca, *Human Communication - Models for Analysis*, (Bucharest: Universitatea din Bucuresti, 1990) p28

²⁷ Ronald Knowles, *Text and Performance* (Macmillan, 1988) p12

throughout Acts Two and Three, enabling Davies to cultivate an individual relationship with both Aston and Mick. The abrupt manner in which the play both begins and ends in the middle of a conversation, the irregular placing of the first interval barely ten seconds after Davies has seen Mick for the first time, the brusque scene shifts immediately after unanswered questions (Mick asking “What’s the game?” 38, Davies asking for a pair of shoes 61) or unfinished answers (Davies trying to explain why someone might be “after” him 53) all introduce a slightly erratic and plotless quality to the performance, underlining what Esslin has called the play’s “indeterminacy, open-endedness and mystery of real life”.²⁹

To return to language: although all three characters in *The Caretaker* are guilty of rambling, irrelevancy and abrupt digression, this does not necessarily mean that they all ramble for the same reasons. The zig-zag nature of Davies’ language, for example, stems for a simple sense of insecurity, one which - combined with a garrulous nature - seeks to fill a silence whenever one presents itself. It is a trait which exhibits itself in the opening minutes of the play, as Aston is showing Davies around the flat. Davies has just related how he had to “go all the way down to Luton” in a bad pair of shoes:

ASTON: What happened when you got there?

Pause.

DAVIES: I used to know a bootmaker in Acton. He was a good mate to me.

Pause.

You know what that bastard monk said to me?

Pause.

How many blacks you got round here, then? (23)

Davies’ sudden, anxious flurry of unrelated sentences is difficult to explain rationally, as Aston’s questions (unlike those of Mick) are neither irrelevant nor unpleasantly interrogative, but simply a prompt to have Davies relate his experiences at Luton. It may be that Davies never reached Luton, which would account for the erratic roll of non-sequiturs which Davies, in a mild panic, provides as a response to Aston. In his non-reply to Aston’s innocent question, Davies manages to confuse the three preceding topics of conversation in one go: i) the problem of acquiring a decent pair of shoes ii) Davies’ negative experiences at the monastery and iii) the Indian

²⁸ Trussler, *The Plays of Harold Pinter*, p78

immigrants who live next door to Aston. Davies' irrepressible desire to always have something to say, to retain the illusion of control in a conversation even when no-one is replying to his questions, seems to overcome the rational impulse of staying with one subject at one time, a single topic which one can explore coherently and consistently in dialogue with another. This shifting, unpredictable movement of Davies' speech betrays a sense of insecurity which, in turn, could be explained by a poor memory and an inarticulateness that produces the largest number of unfinished sentences in the play:

I haven't had a proper sit down...well, I couldn't tell you... (16)

Oh, I got all that underway...that's ...uh...that's...what I'll be doing. (36)

Man who was here...he...*Pause*. (43)

Well, I...I never done caretaking before, you know...I mean to say...I never... (51)

But...but...look...listen...listen here...I mean... (86)

Davies' inability to recall even the most basic details of his origins, his identity, his experiences, his intentions, plays a key role in the errant nature of his speech. Davies rambles, in both senses of the word, because he can no longer remember where he was going to, what point he was making. It should not be forgotten, however, that such a sense of insecurity is also the consequence of a poor, uneducated tramp finding himself in the company of two literate, articulate brothers. It is a class distinction which Mick's cutting irony never lets the tramp forget ("You must come up and have a drink sometime. Listen to some Tchaikovsky" 73). Even Aston, unintentionally, reminds Davies of his cultural inferiority with his questions about Buddhism and technical terms. Significantly, the most coherent and consistent of all Davies' speeches occurs when Davies manages to forget for a moment his inferior status - his vicious diatribe against Aston. "Treating me like a bloody animal! I never been inside a nuthouse!" (76). For almost ninety seconds of stage time, Davies can actually feel superior to someone, disparities of class and status are forgotten as Davies maliciously capitalizes on his 'sanity' at the expense of Aston ("You think

²⁹ Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, p106

you're better than me you got another think coming.") It is hardly a speech which endears Davies to the audience, although we do see a rare self-confidence in Davies as he delivers it, startlingly free of the stammering and rambles which dominate his language for most of the play.

If Davies' rambling speech springs from a poor memory and a class-cultivated sense of inferiority, then Aston's own circuitous semantics have a much more clinical cause, one which is only revealed two thirds of the way through the play. Like Davies, Aston has difficulty in developing conversational themes in a rational, connected choosing instead to leap from topic to topic without attempting to relate them in any way together. After explaining to Davies how a jig-saw is different from a fret saw, Aston continues in the same breath:

ASTON: You know, I was sitting in a café the other day. I happened to be sitting at the same table as this woman...Anyway, we were just sitting there, having this bit of a conversation...then suddenly she put her hand over to mine...and she said, how would you like me to have a look at your body?

DAVIES: Get out of it.

Pause.

ASTON: Yes. To come out with it just like that, in the middle of this conversation. Struck me as a bit odd.

DAVIES: They've said the same thing to me. (34)

Aston appears detached from the flux of reality around him - like Davies, his thought-trains wander, with complete disregard for any sense of context. The very fact that Aston considers the woman's question, unrelated to anything that preceded it, as "odd" suggests not only an irony on the part of the playwright, but also a complete unawareness (on Aston's part) of his own eccentric behaviour. In a sense, Aston - in his disregard for the relevance of one topic to another - displays something of what the Stoics called *apatheia* (not quite the same as 'apathy'), a word the medieval most often translated as *impassibilitas*, or equanimity.³⁰ Apart from the singular significance of his "shed", an idea whose criticism by Davies provokes the only potentially violent response from Aston in the whole play, Aston seems to see all topics of conversation - whether it concerns changing a plug, drinking Guinness or finding a job - as being of equal interest (or disinterest), which may explain how he can abandon them so easily. Nevertheless, however tempting it may be to ascribe

³⁰ see Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) p76

the spontaneity of Aston's conjectures to some kind of Eastern, guru-like serendipity, the fact remains that Aston's thought-trains wander because he is mentally ill. Having been subjected, against his will, to electro-shock therapy, we learn in the famous monologue at the end of Act II how the process has damaged Aston:

The trouble was...my thoughts...had become very slow...I couldn't think at all...I couldn't ...get...my thoughts...together...uuuhh....I could...never quite get it....together. The trouble was, I couldn't hear what people were saying. (66)

Unlike Davies, whose erratic, sprawling dialogue constitutes a desperate attempt to lunge for attention and repair his self-esteem, Aston is serenely indifferent to what people think about him. It is an equanimity which stems from a mental incapacity to relate to the world around him, a symptom Davies mistakes for callous indifference ("...he don't seem to take any notice of what I say to him" 68). Whereas Davies rambles partly because of his poor mental faculties, and partly because he is anxiously searching for the right track, the right topic, the right remark, Aston rambles indifferently because all topics seem to mean the same to him.

Like Aston and Davies, Mick's speech can hop unpredictably from topic to topic at the slightest whim. Unlike Aston and Davies, Mick employs his irrelevancy and obliqueness to devastating effect. Mick's abrupt digressions and sudden, unconnected questions, far from reflecting any degree of mental slowness, insecurity or inferiority complex, are subtle strategies to maintain control of the conversation and bully, startle or confound the other. To digress without warning, for Mick, implies a certain sense of power in a dialogue - it reserves, for the speaker, the tacit right to select the topic of a conversation without consultation. Little wonder that Mick, like Lenny in *The Homecoming*, employs the digression as an indirect means of asserting control, a strategy which is exhibited most frequently in his first encounter with Davies:

MICK: What did you say your name was?

DAVIES: Jenkins.

MICK: I beg your pardon?

DAVIES: Jenkins!

Pause.

MICK: Jen...kins.

A drop sounds in the bucket. Davies looks up.

You remind me of my uncle's brother. He was always on the move, that man. ...
(40)

A twenty-line monologue follows as Mick relates to a terrified Davies, in an amiable manner, a bizarre biography of his uncle's brother, ending with a good-natured return to the conversation: "I hope you slept well". Having taken up once more the original line of questioning, thirty seconds later Mick digresses again:

You know, believe it or not, you've got a funny kind of resemblance to a bloke I once knew in Shoreditch. Actually, he lived in Aldgate. I was staying with a cousin in Camden Town. (41)

Another twenty-line monologue follows. The succession of London place names is bewildering - Aldgate, Camden Town, Finsbury Park, Putney, Fulham. Mick even relates in detail the possible bus services his friend's mother could have taken ("She could get a 38, 581, 30 or 38A..."). Davies must listen to all of this, anxious and uncomprehending. Such irrelevancies, coming from the man who minutes earlier had violently forced him to the ground, are by no means harmless rambles. By abruptly veering off into a friendly, confiding digression about bus routes in a friend's neighbourhood at precisely the point when Davies is anticipating violence or abuse, Mick does something far more effective than any act of violence could ever be: he makes Davies *wait*. The sudden transformation of linguistic register (from the language of threatening-thug to mate-in-the-pub) places his listener in a confused state of uncertainty, forcing Davies into the role of interpreter, desperately awaiting an intelligible sign, a familiar gesture. In such a process, comprehension becomes a gift, a *concession*, a privilege, something Mick may possibly bestow upon Davies, if he chooses to do so. As it is, Davies is paralysed by the flood of irrelevancy ("I used to leave my bike in her garden on my way to work") and seeks in vain a sinister meaning beneath it all. The moment he hears something he can understand, a threat or an insult, he can react - but Mick is far too clever to become intelligible.

"If you wish to be ...transformed into justice, do not intend anything particular by your works and do not embrace any particular Why...".³¹ If one substitutes here 'words' for "works", one can see how the aimlessness and spontaneity of Mick's

³¹ Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994) p145, taken from Sermon 39 - *Iustus in perpetuum vivet*

language in *The Caretaker*, so liberating in Derrida and so spiritually desirable in Eckhart, becomes as a strategy for cruelty and terror. It is precisely this absence of a “particular Why” which enables Mick to disarm and paralyse his victim, keeping Mick’s motives safely and invulnerably uncertain, just as Ruth exploits Lenny’s uncertainty about her own intentions.

Thus, although unpredictable language patterns are a feature of all three characters’ speech in *The Caretaker*, by no means do they take place for the same reasons. Davies’ speech wanders as a consequence of a poor memory, a social ill-at-ease and a stammering desire to ingratiate himself first with one, then with the other brother; Aston drifts from one topic to another because, detached from the world through the cerebral violence of shock therapy, practically all discourses have acquired a kind of ‘sameness’ for him. Out of all three ‘ramblers’ in the play, only Mick tactically *chooses* to ramble and avoid the vulnerability of “straightforward” (70) discourse (ironically the very adjective the deceived Davies attributes to him). Mick alone employs an inconstant, peripatetic style as a strategy to hurt and humiliate others - in this sense, his ‘errancy’ is a falsehood, for Mick knows precisely where he wants to go.

3.2.3 Whylessness in *The Caretaker*.

The just person acts precisely as God acts, without a Why, and so as life lives for its own sake, seeking nothing to justify itself, in the same way the just person knows no Why to justify what they do.
- Meister Eckhart³²

Having briefly examined how the language of *The Caretaker* wanders without a point, we will now examine how the actions in *The Caretaker* occur without a motive. The aim of this section is to show how the whylessness of both Mick and Aston’s actions in *The Caretaker* ultimately contributes to an unresolvable indeterminacy of meaning in the play. In *The Homecoming*, we saw how the paradoxical and inconsistent behaviour of the characters produced an uncertainty which rendered the play resistant to any ‘conclusive’ and ‘coherent’ interpretation, an uncertainty which sends the would-be exegete forever shuttling between a finite

³² Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p146

number of various interpretations, unable to arrive at a final, unproblematic reading. To a lesser extent, the same kind of uncertainty is at work in *The Caretaker* - a text which oscillates endlessly between two irreconcilable interpretations, each of which hinges on how one understands the enigmatic smiles exchanged between the brothers at the end of the play.

I write "to a lesser extent" because, in our study of Pinter's plays - *The Homecoming* (1964), *The Caretaker* (1959), *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* (both 1957) - we are actually moving *backwards*. Although it is not the aim of this project to speculate upon the chronological development of Pinter's work, such a backwards movement will reveal two kinds of uncertainty in Pinter, an uncertainty which in *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* stems from the unknown, but in *The Homecoming* and *The Caretaker* is produced by the undecidable. In Pinter's early works, uncertainty is generated through a mysterious event or occurrence; information is withheld from the audience (Where do McGann and Goldberg take Stanley away to? Who do Gus and Ben work for?), thereby creating a sense of 'mystery'. In *The Homecoming* and *The Caretaker*, however, uncertainty arises not so much through an absence of facts or deferred information, but because the information given is contradictory and leads the audience first in one direction, then the other (Is Aston's altruism genuine or simply Pinter's version of some bizarre 'good cop/bad cop' routine? Is Max's abusive monologue against Ruth simply a joke or a display of genuine resentment?). Endless oscillation between finite possibilities produce the uncertainty of such plays, and not the infinitely speculative depths of unknowable circumstances.

Aston's Love Without Why.

Aston is, in the words of Davies, a "a funny bloke". A taciturn, slow-speaking, benign figure with a penchant for Buddha figures, bric-a-brac and DIY, a character whose unchecked generosity and unquestioning good nature strikes an uneasy note at the start of a Pinter play - witnessing the unproblematic expression of Aston's good nature in the opening minutes of *The Caretaker* is rather like watching the 'happy

family' scene at the beginning of a horror movie. A certain cynicism - fuelled by expectations of what a 'Pinter play' will bring - nurtures unpleasant sensations in us, forces us to scrutinise Aston's open benevolence towards Davies for even the vaguest hint of a more sinister nature. The problem with Aston, however, is that so much of what he does fails to reveal any motive at all. His purchase of the statue, for example (26):

DAVIES: What's this?

ASTON: (*Taking and studying it*) That's a Buddha.

DAVIES: Get on.

ASTON: Yes, I quite like it. Picked it up in a...in a shop. Looked quite nice to me. Don't know why. What do you think of these Buddhas?

DAVIES: Oh, they're ...they're all right, en't they?

"Don't know why". The absence (at least until the 'shock therapy' monologue at the end of Act II) of any information surrounding Aston's past, his childhood, his friends, coupled with Aston's own reluctance to speak at any length about himself or his feelings, makes the unreflective spontaneity of his gestures even more difficult to evaluate. "You don't know where you are with him" complains Davies (70). If there are passionate motives lying beneath the surface of Aston's apparent calm, his aloofness seldom betrays them. The Buddha statue, in a sense, comments ironically throughout the play on the almost ascetic tone of Aston's impassivity, a tranquillity induced more through the unwanted side effects of failed shock therapy than any notion of *nirvana*. The absurd significance he attributes to apparently minor matters - the best way to drink Guinness, the building of his garden shed, the drip in the bucket - reflects, as we mentioned earlier, this equanimity towards all things. Women fail to interest him, or so we gather from his detached account of the 'café' episode. Even the sight of Davies thrusting a knife towards his chest fails (literally) to move him.

The opaque inscrutability of Aston's psychology finds its most positive expression in the unconditional hospitality he extends to Davies until very late in the play, displaying a faith in the tramp's honesty which surprises even Davies:

DAVIES: ...don't you want me to get out...when you're out?

ASTON: You don't have to go out.

DAVIES: You mean...I can stay here?

ASTON: Do what you like. You don't have to come out just because I go out.

DAVIES: You don't mind me staying here?

ASTON: I've got a couple of keys....

(33)

Davies' incredulity at the good will of his new friend mirrors our own. Aston, without any reservations, offers him a bed, a pair of shoes (twice), money for some food and a job. Even after encountering signs of Davies' behaviour which would have dissuaded most people from further acts of charity - Davies' rude and ungrateful acceptance of the shoes (74), for example, or his attempt to swindle more money out of Aston the following morning - Aston continues in his kind, patient manner towards him. The audience's suspicion of Pinter's Good Samaritan gradually turns into alarm for his vulnerability at the hands of an exploitative vagrant. The self-centred motivations which some critics have offered to 'explain' Aston's altruistic actions - that he is lonely and seeks company, or that he performs such actions out of a redemptive sense of 'goodness' and 'charity' - make little sense. Aston's solitary, introspective nature, along with his alleged ignorance of Davies' presence ("...he wasn't talking to me," says Davies, "he don't care about me" 68) hardly paints the picture of a lonely introvert, driven to inviting the homeless into his house out of a need for human companionship. Similarly, at no point in the play does Aston display any awareness of the 'good' and 'moral' implications of his actions, which calls into question whether Aston has any notion of 'charity' at all. In a sense, he is the perfect example of Eckhart's Man Without Why, the "just person" who knows "no Why to justify what they do".³³ For most of the play, Aston treats Davies as his brother, without recourse to any kind of ideological phrase - Christian charity, a sense of humanity, a desire to help the oppressed - which might clarify and render comprehensible an otherwise 'mysterious' benevolence.

Mick's Malice Without Why.

Where Aston's actions, however erratic and inexplicable, have mainly positive benefits (only towards the end provoking unwarranted anger on the part of Davies), the unpredictability of Mick's own mood-swings reveal a groundless desire to degrade and torment. Mick's sociopathic spontaneity ("You saying my brother hasn't got any sense?" 79) represents the inverse of Aston's unmotivated acts of goodness, a

darker version of his brother's impromptu benevolence. Where Aston gives without motivation, Mick attacks without provocation:

DAVIES: ...you been playing me about, you know. I don't know why. I never done you no harm.

MICK: No, you know what it was? We just got off on the wrong foot. That's all it was. (56)

In Act Two, Mick adopts an openly aggressive tone against Davies, sadistically interspersed with friendly, well-meaning interrogatives ("How do you like my room?" 40, "Sleep well?" 41, "Who do you bank with?" 45). As we saw in the previous section, Mick employs brief flashes of cordiality and politeness to unsettle and stun the tramp into terrified confusion. In the third act, the strategy is retained but reversed: this time, it is Mick's confiding, "straightforward", down-to-earth behaviour which is foregrounded, sprinkled with incongruous moments of genuine menace. Consider Mick, asking Davies for his opinion on his brother's laziness, after forty lines of friendly banter over a shared cheese sandwich:

MICK: I'm coming to the conclusion he's a slow worker...What would your advice be?

DAVIES: Well...he's a funny bloke, your brother.

MICK: What?

DAVIES: I was saying, he's ...he's a bit of a funny bloke, your brother.

Mick stares at him.

MICK: Funny? Why?

DAVIES: Well...he's funny...

MICK: What's funny about him?

Pause.

DAVIES: Not liking work.

MICK: What's funny about that?

DAVIES: Nothing.

Pause.

MICK: I don't call it funny.

DAVIES: Nor me. (58-9)

Mick's abrupt changes in the social signals he sends out, occurring as they do just when Davies is beginning to grow confident in his interpretation of them, forever thwart the tramp's naive hermeneutics. Mick simply does not wish to be ascribed a characteristic. The unpredictable nature of Mick's behaviour patterns, however much they resemble the arbitrary whims of a bored monarch, are not without their philosophical significance. In the exchanges between Mick and Davies, Davies

³³ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p146

hardly ever asks a question - Mick commands almost all of the interrogatives. It is Mick who exacts motives, names, assurances from Davies, who perpetuates Davies' vulnerability by rendering him accountable for his words and actions. Mick, abusing the privileges of his culture, economic position and physical superiority, needs to provide no 'why' for his actions. In this sense, Rattigan's comparison of Mick and Aston to the Gods of the Old and New Testaments may have been more acute than Pinter gave him credit for. In his alternating abuse and kindness towards Davies, Mick's manner does resemble the God of Job and Joshua, who 'giveth' one minute and 'taketh away' the next. From the position of power that Mick enjoys, how could Davies, the non-paying tenant, ever dare to demand a 'why'? It is Mick who defines what is "funny" and what is not, who selects which questions are to be asked (repeatedly, if necessary), who decides when to digress and when to get to the point. Even if there *was* a reason behind such gestures, Davies would never be able to ask for it. Therefore, although Mick's brusque transformations of character form part of a strategy to disable his victim, at the same time their unpredictability also reflects the very real sense of power Mick enjoys over his subject.

The impulsive, inexplicable benevolence/malevolence of the two brothers, however different in their effects, ultimately contributes to the same mood of bizarre spontaneity which pervades the play. There is no verifiable way of understanding precisely why Mick goes to such trouble in his psychological torture of Davies, any more than there is a clear reason why Aston makes such an effort to help him. Of course, one could paint Aston as the truly Eckhartian 'Man Without Why', the good soul who thoughtlessly performs good works with no result in mind; Mick would be the pathological inverse of such a type, one who provides an inexplicable hostility alongside Aston's equally inexplicable hospitality. The uncertainty which provides Aston's unmotivated assistance is the same uncertainty which supplies Mick's baseless malice. An uncertainty, as we shall now see, which lies central to the textual instability of the play.

The Enigma of the Smile.

Blake writes: "There is a Smile of Love,/ And there is a Smile of Deceit, / And there is a Smile of Smiles / In which these two Smiles meet".³⁴ There are two smiles in *The Caretaker*, one reported, one observed, although it is by no means clear whether they indicate "Love" or "Deceit". The first smile is never seen - the audience learns of it second-hand through the comprehensive catalogue of complaints about Aston which Davies makes to Mick, related near the beginning of Act Three (72):

Listen, I wake up in the morning...I wake up in the morning and he's smiling at me! He's standing there, looking at me, smiling! I can see him, you see, I can see him thro' the blanket. He puts on his coat, he turns himself round, he looks down at my bed, there's a smile on his face! What the hell's he smiling at? What he don't know is that I'm watching him through that blanket...He just looks at me and he smiles, but he don't know that I can see him doing it!

Davies' anger at a sign he cannot interpret is interesting, reflecting as it does his yearning for the "straightforward" which Mick, on occasions, is happy to supply. Just what the hell *is* Aston smiling at? Is it the smile of a father over his sleeping child? The smile of the eldest over his sleeping baby brother? That the sight of Davies' recumbent figure might provoke some sentimental memories is not implausible - Davies, after all, reminds Mick of his "uncle's brother" (40), someone Esslin suggests might well be his father. Nevertheless, the possibility that Aston's smile constitutes some genuinely positive feeling towards Davies' presence is slightly undermined by the fact that, as Davies points out, Aston completely ignores him when he is awake: "I mean, we don't have any conversation, you see?" (69). Does the smile, therefore, represent Aston's hidden, malicious delight at his own deception of Davies? The smile becomes a secret, something which Aston can only reveal to Davies when his eyes are closed. The second smile, occurring at the end of the play after Mick has smashed the Buddha statue, does nothing to clarify matters:

DAVIES: What about me?
Silence. MICK *does not look at him.*

³⁴ lines 1-4 of "The Smile" - found in David Erdman (ed), *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Doubleday, 1979) p474

*A door bangs.
 Silence. They do not move.
 ASTON comes in. He closes the door, moves into the room and faces MICK.
 They look at each other. Both are smiling, faintly.*

MICK (*beginning to speak to ASTON*): Look...uh... (83-4)

'Faint smiles' which bring to mind once more Trussler's suspicions of a "pre-arranged plot".³⁵ In a sense, the smiles in *The Caretaker* (both reported and observed) introduce a vacuous aporia into the text, one which forever has us in circles, chasing our hermeneutical tails. The meaning of Aston's unmotivated charity - in short, whether a sinister motive lies beneath it - depends on whether the clandestine smile, reported by Davies, are smiles of "Love" or "Deceit". And yet we cannot know whether Aston's smile reflects "Love" or "Deceit" until we are sure of the motives behind Aston's charity. The uncertain significance of Aston's actions can only be explained by the enigma of the smile, which can only be explained by referring to the significance of Aston's actions. It is a lacuna in the text which prevents the interpreter from remaining conclusively with one of two equally flawed readings, both of which contain within themselves elements which justify the other: either a play about two scheming brothers who ensnare a helpless tramp to play psychological games with (but how easily can the convincingly vulnerable picture of Aston's mental instability be explained away as 'scheming'?), or the story of a released mental patient who falls prey to the schemes of a thieving vagrant, and is ultimately rescued by a violent but loyal younger brother (but why the cunning smiles of complicity between the two brothers at the end?). Like Ruth's enigmatic farewell to Teddy as the end of *The Homecoming* ("Don't become a stranger"), a remark whose ultimately unverifiable intentions render its meaning undecidably ironic or serious, the cryptic smiles of Aston and Mick keep us forever switching between two alternative sets of data, neither of which can ever wholly account for the actions in the play. Such smiles possess multiple significations, none of which can be satisfactorily 'justified' by the text without some degree of problemata arising. As the poet says, Aston's smile over the sleeping tramp oscillates impossibly between both

³⁵ Trussler, *The Plays of Harold Pinter*, p182

“Love” and “Deceit” - textually, it constitutes an irresolvable “Smile of Smiles/ In which these two Smiles meet.”

3.2.4 A Semiotic Reading : Davies as the Wandering Text.

This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't amount to much, is like all ghosts: errant. It rolls this way and that, like someone who has lost his way...like someone who has lost his rights, an outlaw, a pervert, a bad seed, a vagrant, an adventurer, a bum. Wandering in the streets, he doesn't even know who he is, what his name is...uprooted, anonymous, unattached to any house or country, this almost insignificant signifier is at everyone's disposal, can be picked up by both the competent and the incompetent, by those who...knowing nothing about it, can inflict all manner of impertinence upon it.

- *Dissemination*, 143-44

Having gone to some lengths to show the indeterminacy of meaning in *The Caretaker*, the object of this final section is to suggest a new reading of *The Caretaker*, a reading whose intention is not by any means to reveal some hitherto undiscovered 'truth' about the play (one which might set it ludicrously 'above' other interpretations), but simply to examine how the play relates to the exclusive concerns of this project. It is, in a sense, an unashamedly Derridean appropriation (and *not* a 'deconstruction') of *The Caretaker*, one which sets the issue of textuality, interpretation and its related problems as the central concern of the play.

Derrida's persistent fascination with the errant nature of the sign, once it is "abandoned to its essential drifting"³⁶, and his imagery of vagrancy and adoption in describing the consequences of "being severed from its referent"³⁷ make *The Caretaker*, from a deconstructionist point of view, a particularly apt choice of play. The story of a homeless tramp with an unreliable memory and a false name, wandering in search of an illusory set of ID papers and unable to recall his origins, who tries to win favour with two brothers by constantly presenting and re-presenting images of himself in accordance with their expectations...such a story has all the ingredients of a Derridean parable, complete with ready-made characters (the Errant Bum, the Generous Reader, the Malicious Appropriator) and an elusive moral.

³⁶Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*(trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) p317

³⁷ ibid 318

Precisely how does the character of Davies resemble Derrida's wandering sign? How efficiently does a play like *The Caretaker* translate into dramatic fiction the implications of philosophical texts such as "Signature, Event, Context" and *Dissemination*? Perhaps 'rootlessness' is the first and most obvious indicator of Davies' semantic vagrancy:

ASTON: Where were you born, then?

DAVIES (*darkly*): What do you mean?

ASTON: Where were you born?

DAVIES: I was...uh...oh, it's a bit hard, like, to set your mind back...see what I mean...going back...a good way...lose a bit of track, like ...you know...(34)

"Not to know where one comes from...is not to know how to speak at all" writes Derrida.³⁸ Not only does Davies' mysterious amnesia physically prevent him from talking about the past, it also prevents him from asserting himself in the present. Davies, in a sense, is a signifier who no longer recalls whatever it was he was supposed to signify. This absence of origins instigates the tramp's insecurity and explains the constant references to his "rights", "rights" which for Davies are not 'self-evident' but tenuously linked to his own fragile, shifting sense of identity. A kind of Caspar Hauser figure, adrift without a past in world which insistently seems to ask him about it, Davies' hopes of 'legitimising' himself - of 'recovering' the original meaning of his existence - lie (of all places) in Sidcup:

DAVIES: I got my papers there!

Pause.

ASTON: What are they doing at Sidcup?

DAVIES: A man I know has got them. I left them with him. You see? They prove who I am! I can't move without them papers. They tell you who I am. You see? I'm stuck without them. (29)

Much has been written about the philosophical import of "them papers" which needn't be repeated here - the existential validity they lend to Davies' existence, their symbolism as a kind of epistemological guarantor, the theological speculations concerning the "man I know", and so on. Pinter, possibly anticipating such esoteric interpretations, quite rightly deflates them in advance by placing Western Man's ontological *raison d'être* not in Rome or Jerusalem but in Sidcup, Kent. What is interesting is how Davies feels paralysed without a referent - as if he were afraid of

straying into new, unfamiliar contexts without the reassuring presence of an originary meaning to tell people who he 'is'. The idea that one's living (and even one's life) may depend on a collection of papers does make us think of K. at the beginning of *The Trial*, rifling through his bureau for the precious *Legitimationspapiere* - unlike Josef K., who is ultimately condemned for possessing the identity he has, Davies seems rather to suffer for not possessing any identity at all.

In fact, it is Davies' aboriginality, the uncertainty surrounding his 'real' name, which seems to be the key factor in his ultimate misfortune. Davies is no Ruth, who takes advantage of Lenny's unfamiliarity with her background to tease and confound him. Whereas Ruth uses the indeterminacy of her own identity to puzzle and exploit her would-be 'interpreters', the uncertainty of Davies' identity allows Mick to impose whatever identity he wishes upon the tramp ("...you're a born fibber" 43, "You stink" 44, "...you're a man of the world" 57, "You're an interior decorator" 80). Davies' namelessness - that is, his inability to supply the documentary evidence of his original name - is negative, depicted as a state of vulnerability, not unpredictability; rather than the freedom of being able to adopt whatever name one chooses, not to have a name for Davies means to have to submit to whatever name is imposed upon him. Davies' non-existent biography effectively means he is - as Derrida would say - "at everyone's disposal".³⁹

Hence the tramp's desperate search for any identity which might make him feel 'at home'. Davies, the errant text with no history or author to speak for him, spends the entire play looking for a context, a desire for stability which ultimately plays him right into Mick's manipulative hands. One might even say Davies finds, in Aston and Mick, two kinds of reader: a passive reader and an exploitative one. In the first act, Davies' benevolent reception from the patient, softly-spoken Aston encourages him to construct and develop, with increasing confidence, a general image of himself as a clean-living, deserving, honest Englishman, unfairly dismissed and yet still with a sense of dignity:

³⁸ *Dissemination*, p144

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (trans. Barbara Johnson, London: Athlon, 1981)144

I might have been on the road for a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. (18)

I might have been on the road but nobody's got more rights than I have. (19)

I'm not the sort of man who wants to take any liberties. (35)

...they're trying to do away with these foreigners, you see, in catering. They want an Englishman to pour their tea, that's what they want... (36)

Each of these four assertions is wholly undermined by evidence in the play - Aston's insistence upon the open window reveals the olfactory truth about Davies' 'cleanliness'; the absence of any papers throws doubts upon his "rights"; Davies' rummaging about the flat in Aston's absence shows he is *precisely* the sort of man who would want to take "liberties"; finally, the tramp's claim to be an "Englishman" is ridiculed not only by his allegedly 'real' name ("Mac Davies") but also by a complete inability to recall any place of birth - at one point, Aston even suggests he is Welsh.

As we have seen in the previous section, it is difficult to discern whether Aston is a passive or simply a naive reader of Davies' signs. Despite the obvious disparity between the image Davies constructs and the image the audience actually receives, his listener - although not particularly forthcoming with assurances - raises few objections. At no point does Aston attempt to inscribe upon Davies his own preconceived notions of who Davies might be, nor contradict any of the tramp's assertions with an interpretation of his own. Aston's 'open' hermeneutics allows Davies' text to unfold as it is, without being duped or coerced into a pre-arranged context.

With Mick's appearance at the beginning of Act II, Davies comes face to face with a different kind of interpreter - one who, unlike Aston, refuses to allow Davies any kind of textual space in which to proffer a reading of himself. Cynical and suspicious, Davies' new reader receives nothing from him unquestioningly, forces him to repeat his name continually, even calling into question his much-prized Englishness ("You a foreigner?...Born and bred in the British Isles?" 42). The most oft-cited words in *The Caretaker*, delivered by Mick to Davies near the very end of the play, reveal more about Mick than they do about Davies (82):

What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you come into this house there's been nothing but trouble. Honest. I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations.

As most critics have commented, the irony in Mick's accusations of strangeness is undeniable, especially when he goes on to call Davies "violent", "erratic" and "completely unpredictable" (82). The moment is obviously comic - Mick the shape-changer, who has bullied and tormented the tramp for almost an hour of stage-time with his split personality, is now the symbol of enraged common sense, accusing him of violence, inconsistency and deceit. Nevertheless, when Mick accuses Davies' speech of being "open to any number of interpretations", he is quite serious. Mick not only believes in the openness of Davies' language, he is delighted with it - this absence of any context or background which might have given Davies' words a specific meaning is precisely what Mick has been exploiting all along. Had Davies already possessed a context of his own - in other words, had he possessed a background, a job, an address, a proper name - then Mick would hardly have been able to supply so many different ones.

Throughout the play, Mick effectively 're-reads' Davies, changing his interpretation each time. The method operates in two ways: when in 'hostile' mode, Mick aggressively imposes his own context upon Davies, using his education, youth and position to enforce his reading. When 'friendly' to Davies, Mick *lures* him into his context, convincing the tramp of his own reading through flattery and promises. Thus, in his first encounter with Davies, Mick is quick to interpret Davies' actions as those of an illegal squatter ("You got no business wandering about an unfurnished flat" 44), a "fibber" and a thief ("This bag's very familiar" 47). By maliciously offering to sell the flat to him, Mick reminds Davies of his inferior socio-economic status, offering the tramp credit terms and instalment deals with degrading irony. The proffered text of Davies the Dignified Tramp, fallen on hard times through no fault of his own, becomes Davies the Thieving Scrounger, ready to steal the first thing he can lay his hands on.

On his second encounter with Davies, Mick initiates a new, more sympathetic reading of his "brother's guest", dismissing his previous interpretation as having "got off on the wrong foot" (56). With slow, gentle tones of assurance, Mick

disarms the tramp's wariness with a version of Davies that practically includes him in the family - "...you're my brother's friend, aren't you?" (56). Requesting opinions on his brother's laziness, admiring his "impressive" self-assertiveness, confiding in him his plans for a dream "penthouse"...Mick is sadistically aware of the tramp's need for an identity, and offers Davies role after role, context after context - confidant, bosom-buddie, man-of-the-world, even war veteran:

MICK: Well, I could see before, when you took out that knife, that you wouldn't let anyone mess you about.

DAVIES: No one messes me about, man.

MICK: I mean, you've been in services, haven't you?

DAVIES: The what?

MICK: You been in the services. You can tell by your stance.

DAVIES: Oh...yes. Spent half my life there, man. Overseas...like...serving...I was.

MICK: In the colonies, weren't you?

DAVIES: I was over there. I was one of the first over there.

MICK: That's it. You're just the man I been looking for. (60)

Mick is so effective at engineering contexts, he even gets Davies to create his own. A simple prompt and Davies is off, busily re-writing himself as a hardened, self-disciplined soldier with years of experience in the colonies, presumably keeping the Empire safe from "them Blacks". The speed with which Davies sweepingly re-describes his past in the space of three sentences ("Spent half my life there...") reveals to us two things. Firstly, how desperately eager Davies is to fulfil the slightest expectation presented to him - whether it is feigning a knowledge of Buddhism or carpentry, or claiming an ability to re-furnish a flat. Rousseauistic resonances aside, there is something movingly pathetic about Davies' desire for semantic stability, the way Mick plays so easily with the tramp's need for an ontological home. Unlike the Eckhartian soul and the Derridean text, whose joyful, centreless errancies celebrate the loss of the centre and the pathlessness of the way before it, Davies' wandering is anguished and involuntary, a constant desire for stability. Secondly, no one who had a past could produce a fictitious one so quickly - the absence of Davies' background facilitates this lightning re-description of himself. In a sense, Davies claims cannot constitute "lies", as Mick says, for the tramp can recall no "truth" about his past which might make his claims mendacious. They are simply different stories from the mouth of a wandering amnesiac.

This absence of Davies' *Urtext* not only assists the tramp's desperate self-creation and re-creation, it also makes possible Mick's final reading of Davies in his work of exploitative hermeneutics - the transition from Davies the Interior Decorator to Davies the Impostor. When Mick finds out that Davies *won't* be able to fit "teal-blue linoleum squares" and have their colours "re-echoed in the walls" after all, the 'truth' is revealed:

MICK: Christ, I must have been under a false impression!

DAVIES: I never said it!

MICK: You're a bloody impostor, mate!

DAVIES: Now you don't want to say that sort of thing to me. You took me on here as a caretaker...I never said nothing about that...you start calling me names-

MICK: What is your name?

DAVIES: Don't start that -

MICK: No, what's your real name?

DAVIES: My real name's Davies.

MICK: What's the name you go under?

DAVIES: Jenkins!

MICK: You got two names. What about the rest? Eh? (82)

Faced with a text of no origin, Mick is the malicious, uninformed reader, one of those "who, knowing nothing about it, can inflict all manner of impertinence upon it." (*Dissemination*, 144). Mick's feigned indignation at the 'discovery' of his own misreading is the *coup de grace* in his torment of Davies. He is too busy faking his anger at a misinterpretation he deliberately engineered, to ask how a man without a past can be an impostor. Having imposed so many identities upon him, Mick ironically castigates Davies for the very non-identity which permitted his proliferation of readings in the first place. Nevertheless, after having described and re-described Davies so many times ("Listen, sonny. You stink." 44, "You don't stink." 79, "...you stink from arsehole to breakfast time" 83), perhaps Mick, in his final and conclusive reading of Davies as Impostor, arrives closest towards the 'truth' about Davies' 'non-truth', the fact that Davies has no 'proper' name, just an endless potentiality for improper ones. Both Aston and Mick may well have understood this deeper 'homelessness' of Davies' from the very beginning; only their reactions towards Davies' amnesia were different - where Aston chose to accept and to welcome, Mick resolved to appropriate.

Thus, the final image of the wanderer glimpsed at the end of *The Caretaker* is a negative one, the tramp adrift and helpless, unable to affirm the absence of his origins as freedom, but simply resenting his aboriginality as 'lack', as something from which he must *recover*. Bruce Chatwin writes in *The Songlines* (itself a treatise on aboriginality and an anthology of errancy):

Yet, in the East, they still preserve the once universal concept : that wandering re-establishes the original harmony which once existed between man and the universe.⁴⁰

There is no re-establishment of "original harmony" in Davies' wandering. Such a general celebration of the thought of non-destination - the re-affirmation of wandering as the 'natural' state of things - is echoed to a certain extent in Eckhart and Derrida, but finds no place in *The Caretaker*. Whereas the Eckhartian soul wanders as a means of joyfully achieving identity with the nothingness and non-location of the Godhead, Davies' centrelessness only brings him anguish and humiliation. Where Derrida's "joyous ...wandering without return" refuses to lament the loss of one's origins and affirms an exhilarating "freedom",⁴¹ Davies is unable to see his peregrinary condition as nothing but woeful exposure to the Other (be it "them Blacks", a vindictive "Scotchman", "them bastard monks" or a malicious, unpredictable landlord). In the end, the Buddha statue makes a mockery of Davies' own rootless wanderings, a peregrination which ends in humiliation, not enlightenment. In contrast to Eckhart and Derrida, the errancy of *The Caretaker* is neither *joyeuse* nor liberating, but simply another synonym for miserable vulnerability.

⁴⁰ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Picador, 1987) p200

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978) p293,68

Chapter Four: Uncertainty, Names and Violence

4.1 The Welcoming of the Mystery : Eckhartian ‘emptiness’ and Derridean ‘openness’.

The Other resembles God.
- Levinas¹

To absolutely welcome the Other is to preserve the Other as a state of irreducible uncertainty, to suspend the desire to as-certain exactly who or what the Other is, to suppress the wish to name, to avoid assimilating or incorporating the other into a reassuringly familiar vocabulary. The object of this chapter will be to compare the Eckhartian/Derridean response to the uncertainty of the ‘infinitely Other’, to examine the terms of ‘emptiness’ and ‘openness’ which they subsequently invoke, and to try and understand how Eckhart’s idea of description/conception as doing violence upon the Other is in part adopted, in part rejected by Derrida.

As some of the most interesting aspects of Derrida’s understanding of otherness can be discerned from his early work on Levinas, I will be examining an initial scepticism on the part of Derrida towards the idea of a ‘non-violent phenomenology’, in contrast to a much more recent re-assertion of his position vis-à-vis Levinas and the ‘welcome of the Other’.

In comparing Eckhartian ‘emptiness’ and Derridean ‘openness’ towards the Other, three difficulties lie before us: firstly, the disparity between both Levinas and Derrida’s Other, which may be a ‘mystery’ but is not necessarily a synonym for God, and Eckhart’s divinely unnameable Other, with whom the intention is ultimately to achieve union. Secondly, there is the problematic juncture of Greek and Old Testament thought in Eckhart, reader of Proclus and Maimonides, the meeting within Eckhart’s writings of two traditions - the Neoplatonic God of emanating oneness and simplicity (“...the pure being of divine unity which is being beyond

¹ cit. by Derrida in *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978) 142

being”)² and the concealed, unspeakable God of Exodus whose face no man may see (“the hidden darkness of the eternal Godhead [which] never shall be known”).³ Such a synthesis of Greek and Hebrew thought in Eckhart, though obviously not exclusive to the Dominican, is not without parallels to Levinas’ own work, and makes Derrida’s critique of Levinas’ “non-Greek” attempt to slay his “Greek father” (that is, his attempt as a Jewish thinker to escape Greek metaphysics and thus “break with Parmenides”) all the more interesting.⁴ Finally, there is the genuine disparity between Derrida’s early 1964 critique of Levinas, admiring yet highly critical, and his repeated affirmations in later years of a deeper affinity between Levinas’ writings and his own. A disparity which will make it all the more difficult to ascertain exactly where Derrida stands in relation to Eckhartian *gelâzenheit*.

4.1.1 Gelassenheit - Preserving the Uncertain.

Scholar:...even releasement can still be thought of as within the domain of the will, as is the case with old masters of thought such as Meister Eckhart.

Teacher: From whom, all the same, much can be learned.

-Heidegger⁵

Both Derrida and Heidegger acknowledge the centrality of Eckhart to any genealogy of *Gelassenheit* (in medieval German *gelâzenheit*), a word invariably translated as ‘detachment’, ‘releasement’ or ‘letting-be’. Heidegger, although willing elsewhere to testify to Eckhart’s “sharpness and depth of thinking”⁶, is keen to have his Scholar in the tripartite discussion within *Gelassenheit* distance himself from the mystic’s original *gelâzenheit*, which is (says Heidegger’s Scholar) nothing more than “casting off sinful selfishness and letting self-will go in favour of the divine will”.⁷ Whether this is the only way to appropriate Eckhart’s concept, we shall see in a moment.

²Oliver Davies(ed), *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994) p235 - taken from the sermon *Renovamini spiritu*

³ M.O’C.Walsh(ed),*Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises* (London: Watkins, 1979) vol II, p 249 from the sermon *Haec dicit dominus*

⁴ *Writing and Difference*, 89

⁵Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund [London: Harper & Row, 1966]) p62

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1978) p71

Derrida, in a passage discussing the way negative theology “lets passage, lets the other be”, speaks of “the tradition of *Gelassenheit* which goes from Eckhart, at least, to Heidegger”.⁸ In part etymologically responsible for the word *Gelassenheit*, to what extent is Eckhart’s exhortation to “leave God to himself” and adopt a “complete openness” (*ledeger offenung*) towards the divine Other⁹ analogous to Derrida’s “absolute openness”?¹⁰ It is a question which might best be answered by first examining how ‘violence upon the Other’ is understood in Eckhart’s sermons, and how one can invite the Otherness of God into the soul whilst still respecting its infinite and unspeakable alterity.

Doing Violence upon God.

In Chapter Two of this project, we examined how Eckhart, following Avicenna in establishing God as a “being to whom nothing is, or can be, similar”¹¹, embarked upon a critique of presence which came to insist that no name could adequately represent the ineffability of God. Having seen why we *cannot* name God, we shall now take a moment to consider why Eckhart says we *should* not name God.

Eckhart’s attitude towards the naming of God - whether such names are used to invoke, perceive or conceive - is not without its ambiguities. In insisting upon the oneness and the nameless simplicity of God, Eckhart takes up a familiar Neoplatonic motif and therefore also adopts a characteristically Dionysian understanding of what names are - that is, a consequence of the descent from oneness into multiplicity, symptoms of the fragmentary fall from perfect, nameless unity into an imperfect profusion of names. The farther a name is from the source, the greater its dissimilarity.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund [London: Harper & Row, 1966]) p62

⁸ “Post-Scriptum” in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) p 316

⁹ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p245

¹⁰ taken from a transcript of the discussion “Perhaps or Maybe” in Midgley(ed), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction* (Coventry: Parousia Press, 1997)

¹¹ James M. Clark, *Meister Eckhart* (London: Nelson & Sons, 1957) p179, taken from Avicenna’s *Metaphysicae* IX:1

Although Dionysius acknowledges at the very beginning of *The Divine Names* that it is “with a wise silence” that we best “do honour to the Inexpressible”¹², names are seen more as being ‘obstructive’ than ‘violent’, emanations which potentially could return one to the source: “The Good returns all things to itself and gathers together the scattered”.¹³ The possibility that to name God might be to inflict an act of injustice upon Him, whilst not completely absent from *The Divine Names*, does not seem to be a central concern of Dionysius’.

In sermons such as *Misit dominus manum suam*, Eckhart initially seems to adopt a similar line. Although God is “above names and nature”, nevertheless “some names are permitted to us, with which the saints have addressed him.” (*Doch sint uns die namen erloubet, dâ mite in die heiligen genant hânt...*).¹⁴ This echoes the Thomist compromise on names found in the *Summa*, where Aquinas resolves that although names “do not signify what God is”, each one nevertheless “signifies him in an imperfect manner”.¹⁵ Elsewhere, however, in sermons such as *Quasi stella matutina* and *Quasi vas auri*, Eckhart seems to go further than both Dionysius and Aquinas in seeing names not only as inadequate but also unjust, reductive, exploitative and ultimately *violent*.

This association of eponymy with violence, this linking of the name or image, however praiseworthy, with the unethical imposition of force and *gewalt*, finds its beginnings in an understanding of naming as a kind of deceitfulness. The prophets who glimpsed God and were struck dumb by what they saw are praised by Eckhart because “they preferred silence to lies” (...*das si swigen vnd wolten nicht liegen*).¹⁶ Why is to name necessarily to lie? The word Eckhart uses for ‘lies’ is *liegen* - he does not say ‘error’, ‘inadequate’ or ‘foolish’ but *lies*. Why is the attempt to convey

¹² *Pseudo-Dionysius : The Complete Works* (trans. Colm Luibheid, London: SPCK, 1987) p50

¹³ *ibid*, p75. Grosseteste, the 13th century commentator on Dionysius, best sums up this idea of multiplicity as a means of returning to the oneness: “Without material forms and figures...we shall eventually contemplate the divine and intellectual beings, yet we shall not be able to attain to this contemplation unless we first use both the uplifting forms and the material figures.” A.J.Minnis & A.B.Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism Circa 1100-1375* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) p169

¹⁴ Davies, *Selected Writings*, p129 - Sermon 53 in Quint, *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1936ff) 2:534

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, Question XIII, reply to Objection 1 - found in A. Hyman & J.Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1973) p492

¹⁶ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p137 - from the sermon *Eratis enim aliquando tenebrae*, Sermon 50 in Quint, 2:454

the incommensurability of God, however admittedly futile, construed by Eckhart to be an intentional, conscious “travesty of the truth”?

There is little in Eckhart’s brief sermon which might help us on this question- Eckhart talks a great deal about the reasons for the prophets’ silence, but offers no elaboration on why the attempt to break with such a silence might be considered mendacious. In another sermon, *Renovamini spiritu*, the word ‘lies’ *liegen* occurs again: “...do not chatter about God, for by chattering about him, you tell lies and commit a sin” (...do von swig vnd klafe nit von gotte; wande mit dem, so dv von ime claffest, so Ivgest dv, so tustu svnde).¹⁷ The same idea presents itself: silence concerning God is authenticity, sincerity, whilst any attempt to name God or discuss His nature is to knowingly mis-represent a truth. And yet, in the case of an ineffable God, one may indeed pronounce errors, but how can anyone *lie*?

Eckhart’s cynicism towards the act of naming becomes clearer if we read the Rabbi Maimonides, whose twelfth century *Guide of the Perplexed* (a work Eckhart cites and would have read in a Latin translation, *Doctor Perplexorum*), whilst refraining from the word ‘lie’, vilifies those who would try to talk about God and thereby affront His ineffability. Maimonides’ negative description of such sophistry is interesting, insofar as he discerns a subtle will-to-power in their speculations. He speaks of so-called poets and preachers who “spent great efforts on sermons ...they compiled and through which, in their opinion, they come nearer to God”.¹⁸ Such sophists are insincere interpreters, who “derive from [the scriptures] inferences and secondary conclusions, and found upon them various kinds of discourses.” For Maimonides, the danger in attributing names and predicates to God is not just one of intellectual pride (“...they think what they speak is poetry”) but also the exploitation of the “multitude who listen to these utterances”.¹⁹ Ultimately, he is indeed a liar who “apprehends the deficiency of those speeches and yet uses those speeches”. For God is nameless: therefore, to know this and still to name Him is a lie.

Maimonides (or *Rabbi Moyses*, as Eckhart calls him) helps us to understand Eckhart’s unease with names and descriptions. He allows us an insight into why

¹⁷ *ibid*, p236- Sermon 83 in Quint 3:442

¹⁸ *Guide of the Perplexed*, ch. 59, in Hyman & Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, p376

¹⁹ *ibid*, p377

Eckhart's sermons give the impression of one who simply does not *trust* names, nor the reasons why people use them. In fact, the Dominican's insistence on the mendacity of the cataphatic reveals a deeper suspicion about all discourse on God in general, and leads him along a more cynical route away from Dionysius' slightly more positive (albeit temporary) acceptance of imperfect names and images. In many of Eckhart's sermons, names and images of God are invariably linked with metaphors of reification and violence:

If anyone said that God was good, he would do Him as great an injustice as if he called the sun black.

*Wer dâ spraeche daz got guot waere, der taete im als unrehte, als ob er die sunnen swarz hieze.*²⁰

The incommunicability of God's Otherness is so complete that even the highest compliments do nothing more than commit an act of injustice (*unreht*) upon the *totaliter alter* of the Godhead. Any names or images we try to impose on God through an act of will, instead of letting Him be, only serve to obstruct his flowing into us - a situation Eckhart calls our 'unpreparedness':

But we do violence to him and wrong by obstructing him in his natural work through our unpreparedness.

*Aber wir tuon im gewalt und unreht mit dem, daz wir in sînes natiurlichen werkes hindern mit ûnser unbereitschaft.*²¹

We will, in a moment, examine this overcoming of 'unpreparedness' - that is, through the soul's emptying of all images and names concerning God - in greater detail. For now, the most important thing to note - in terms of our project - is how, for Eckhart, description connotes violence, the equating together of unequal things. Eckhart feels this so strongly that he is often driven to quite striking metaphors:

...if a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion...than by the fireside or in the stable - that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak round His head and shoving Him under a bench. (*In hoc apparuit*).

²⁰ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p207, from the sermon *Quasi stella matutina* - German taken from Josef Quint, *Textbuch zur Mystik des deutschen Mittelalters* (Halle: M.Niemeyer, 1952) p12

²¹ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p41 - German taken from Josef Quint, *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart, 1936ff) vol 5., Traktat 2, p281

You behave as if you made of God a candle in order to seek something with it, and when one finds the thing one seeks, the candle is thrown away. (*Omne datum optimum*).

But there are people who want to see God with the same eyes with which they look at a cow...you love it for the milk and the cheese and for your own profit. (*Quasi vas auri*).²²

What Eckhart suggests - and what is so interesting to our own investigations - is not only that God can be *used*, but that names and images facilitate this use. To name is to reify, to turn something into an object, an object which (potentially) can suit our purposes, fit our designs. This Eckhartian distrust of the desire to name and describe reminds us, in *Of Grammatology*, of the moment where Derrida playfully juggles with the image of writing as zoography - "the capture of the living", the notion of representation as that which constitutes "the magical capture and murder" of the "hunted beast".²³ The fact that the act of naming carries with it an implied position of power presents an obvious problem for the believer who wishes to speak about the Ineffable with any degree of humility. Eckhart cannot ignore these implications of the name, as his repeated warnings against the 'using' of God to obtain one's own ends testifies. Does Adam, in Genesis 2:19, not name the animals he is to keep and raise? The will to name, to conceptualise God, to understand Him (and why, as St Augustine asked, would anyone want a God they could understand?²⁴) really is for Eckhart nothing more than "taking God, wrapping a cloak round His head and shoving Him under a bench". Although it appears in a wide selection of his sermons with varying degrees of intensity, Eckhart never really abandons this association of eponymy with the imposition of power - like Maimonides, he sees the will to know, and to speak about what one knows, as carrying with it all too often a more selfish will to control, use and exploit. Unlike the *genuine* desire to know God - the desire which "wants Him where he has no name"²⁵ - Eckhart fears a desire which sees the name as fitting its own purposes, as a means of obtaining its own ends, and certainly

²² the three quotations (in order) taken from : Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, vol 1, p117; Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p173; Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p102

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. G.C.Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 292.

²⁴ Augustine, Sermon 117, ch. 3, n.5

²⁵ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p57, from the sermon *Mulier, venit hora et nunc est*

not as a temporary, Neoplatonic stage of return towards a primordial, nameless Oneness.

Thus, the acts of naming and conceptualising finds a negative response in Eckhart not simply because of their analogical inadequacy, but also for their implications of force and *gewalt*. However, there is a third reason why names and images have no place in the soul's ultimate union with God - a reason which, above all else, is semiotic in nature, and has more to do with the sign indicating an absence, than any notion of violence or insufficiency. In Eckhart's sermon on the conversion of St Paul, *Surrexit autem Saulus*, he speaks of four reasons why the soul does not name God.

The third reason is that [the soul] does not have enough time to name Him. It cannot turn away long enough from love. It can pronounce no other word than love.

*Daz dritte: si enhâte sô vil zîtes niht, daz si in genante. Si enkan sô lange von minne niht gekêren; si enmac kein ander wort geleisten wan minne.*²⁶

To name is not to love; to love is not to name. Eckhart's point is simple: when one is in the presence of something, no name for it is needed. Only when the thing is taken away does one need a name to talk about it. Eckhart, unlike many of his scholastic contemporaries, does not simply realise that the sign *stands in* for something, that it indicates an *absence*, not a presence - a semiology of lack cynically summed up elsewhere by Derrida: "The sign is always a sign of the Fall. Absence always relates to distance from God".²⁷ He is also keenly aware that discourse about God can only take place when God is not present - and Eckhart is much more interested in experiencing God than talking about Him. Names are opposed to love because they necessitate the absence of the beloved - only by "turning away" from God can one name Him. And it is precisely in this idea of 'experiencing' an unmediated encounter with God, the possibility that one can mistakenly "turn away" from the *presence* of God towards an inferior name or image, that Derrida's deconstructive scepticism - as we shall see - inevitably distinguishes itself from the apophatic discourse. For

²⁶ *ibid* 125 - Sermon 71 in Quint 3:222

²⁷ *Of Grammatology*, 283

Derrida, it is never a question of renouncing the plenitude of the ineffable for a mere name - one is simply turning from one sign to another.

Silence and Stillness: Emptying the Temple.

The finest thing that we can say of God is to be silent concerning him from the wisdom of inner riches. - Meister Eckhart²⁸

Having examined how all attempts to talk about God, for Eckhart, constitute an act of injustice and even violence upon Him, principally because they all contain within them something “alien and untrue”, the question remains: how exactly are we meant to contemplate, and ultimately welcome in, the radical Otherness of God? If all names carry within them the potential to violently reduce God, then with what name are we meant to invoke Him? If all representation involves the reductive yoking of images to the essentially imageless, then what images can we use at all? If all images, marks and noises only serve to ‘push’ the divine ipseity away from us, then it seems - at least for Eckhart - God must remain infinitely Other to all our discourses.

Eckhart avoids this epistemological (not to say spiritual) blind alley through his insistence on the soul remaining “empty” and “open” to God. It is a passive ‘opening-up’ of the soul towards the Godhead, one which does not attempt to graft images and concepts onto the divine Other, but simply “lets God be” within the ground of the soul. Hence Eckhart’s radical interpretation of Matthew 21:12, where Jesus drives the money-lenders out of the temple. For Eckhart, the temple is the soul, which needs to be emptied of images and conceptions (in this case, the vendors and the money-lenders) before God can dwell there:

When the temple becomes free of hindrances, that is from attachment to self and ignorance, then it is so radiantly clear...that no-one can match its radiance but the uncreated God alone.

*Swenne dirre tempel alsus ledic wirt von allen hindernissen, daz ist eigenschaft und unbekanteit, sô blicket er alsô schône...daz im nieman widerschînen mac dan der ungeschaffene got aleine.*²⁹

Once again, like attracts like: if the soul is to achieve union with God, it can only do so by becoming as imageless and nameless - “as free as nothingness is free” - as God

²⁸ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p236

Himself. Who are the money-lenders Jesus ejects? They are those people, both good and bad, who have a concept of God, a concept they can commodify and use for their own profit, a concept to which they can chain the motivations for their actions, the goal for all their works. God cannot dwell in the temple as long as it is cluttered up with such “merchants”.

Such an emphasis on “clearing” the temple of all metaphysical preconceptions and apparatus does bring us closer not only to Heidegger’s description of *Dasein* as a *Lichtung* or ‘clearing’, but also nearer indirectly to Derrida. Not surprisingly, Heideggerian readings of Eckhart such as those of Caputo and Schürmann unambiguously associate Eckhart’s ground of the soul with Heidegger’s *Lichtung*, “the openness in which beings appear...freed from the dominance of representation and possession.”³⁰, whilst carefully retaining the difference in contexts. It is a caution we must replicate on our own part: the fact that Eckhartian *gelâzenheit* influenced Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, which in turn forms a central element in Derrida’s critique of metaphysics, does not automatically mean that Eckhart’s opening-up of the soul towards God is identical with Derrida’s opening up of oneself to the play of the world. As we shall see in his critique of Levinas, Derrida will have a number of problems with Eckhart’s attitude towards the violence of the image and the name, and with the idea that one can somehow ‘bypass’ such violence to obtain an unmediated ‘experience’ of the Other.

4.1.2 Derridean Reservations

In exploring the text of “Violence and Metaphysics” to illustrate Derrida’s differences with Eckhart’s apophatic discourse, two points should be kept in mind: firstly, that concerning the essentially violent nature of all representation (graphic *and* phonetic), both Eckhart and Derrida are in perfect agreement. It is the ‘innocent’ status of the subject of this violence, and the idea that we can ever avoid such violence completely, that provides the basis of the disjunction between Eckhart and Derrida’s critique of representation. Secondly, insofar as Eckhart never privileges

²⁹ *ibid*, 155- Sermon 1 in Quint 1:12

firstly, that concerning the essentially violent nature of all representation (graphic *and* phonetic), both Eckhart and Derrida are in perfect agreement. It is the 'innocent' status of the subject of this violence, and the idea that we can ever avoid such violence completely, that provides the basis of the disjunction between Eckhart and Derrida's critique of representation. Secondly, insofar as Eckhart never privileges speech over writing - for the Dominican, all attempts to represent God are inadequate, be they written, painted, sung or murmured - he escapes the charges of phonocentricity which Derrida aims at Saussure, Rousseau and Levi-Strauss.³¹ However, although Eckhart appears to have the deconstructionist's healthy suspicion of representation, be it phoneme or grapheme, the question remains as to what kind of reservations Derrida nurtures towards Eckhart's *gelâzenheit* - in particular, the possibility of experiencing the infinite Otherness of God in a space bereft of signs, names and images. Reservations which, I will argue, are best examined in the light of Derrida's early work on Levinas.

Early Derrida: The Unavoidability of 'Originary Violence'.

That Derrida sees all contemporary discourse concerning the Other - and our relationship to that Other - as having ultimately theological origins, is no grand revelation; Derrida, following Levinas, calls the relationship between God and the individual "the original metaphor"³² for the question of the Other. It is therefore equally unsurprising that Derrida should see Levinas' attempt to enter into a non-violent relationship with the irreducibly Other as placing Levinas "at arms with problems which were equally the problems of negative theology" (*Aux prises avec*

³⁰ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p200

³¹ One could take issue with this, given the fact that in a number of sermons (*In his quae patris*, for example), Eckhart does quote that Derridean epitome of phonocentricity 2 Corinthians 3:6 "The letter (that is, all outward practices) kills, but the Spirit gives life". However, Eckhart's interesting amendment to the verse - "all outward practices" - suggests that what the Dominican understands by "letter" includes *all* discourse, written and spoken, a possibility reinforced by the verse quoted immediately afterward: "When you pray, do not use many words in your prayers like the Pharisees, for they think to be heard with much speaking." (Matt 6:7, Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, vol.1, p36). Meaning may well be privileged and separated from discourse here, but it is difficult to see how speech is privileged over writing.

³² *Writing and Difference*, p142

*dés problèmes qui furent aussi bien ceux de la théologie négative...).*³³ Can the experience of the Other ever take place non-violently? Can one ever truly talk *to* the Other, talk *about* the Other, without ultimately incorporating it into the Same? Will a certain violence not be unavoidable?

First of all one should stress, as with Eckhart, that both Derrida and Levinas agree on the “ancient clandestine friendship between light and power” (*Vielle amitié occulte entre la lumière et la puissance*).³⁴ Derrida’s essay does not seek to challenge Levinas’ association of knowledge with violence - he is merely sceptical of the various attempts Levinas makes to circumvent this. It is a position which, without reading a word of “Violence and Metaphysics”, could quickly be deduced from a handful of remarks in *Of Grammatology*. In deconstructing the Rousseauistic/Saussurean vilification of writing, Derrida maintains it is *not* his intention to “make writing innocent”, but simply to insist on the “originary violence” of all discourse, written *and* spoken. The violence of writing “does not befall an innocent language”, if only because speech, far from being the peaceful alternative envisaged by Saussure and Rousseau, is always already a kind of writing itself.³⁵

In the same way, Derrida’s problem with Levinas is not so much his notion of “violence”, but his belief in the possibility of “non-violence”. The question of whether Levinas ever succeeds (in Derrida’s eyes) in providing a non-violent phenomenology for the Other, has been much discussed, which perhaps in itself is testimony to the density and difficulty of Derrida’s text. Suffice to say that most critics feels “Violence and Metaphysics” to be not so much a critique of *Totality and Infinity* but more of a deconstruction.³⁶

³³ *ibid*, p116, *L’Écriture* 170

³⁴ *ibid*, p91, 136

³⁵ *Of Grammatology*, 37

³⁶ An examination of the variety of critical responses to Derrida’s early essay on Levinas would be worth an essay in itself. A very definite sense of uncertainty, exacerbated by the often wildly contrasting tones of admiration and refutation to be found in “Violence and Metaphysics”, seems to pervade most of the critics’ reactions to it. Is Derrida, in his remarks on Levinas, “much more intent on burying Caesar than praising him?” asks Critchley (Midgley, *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, p94). “Is Derrida explicating Levinas or correcting him?” asks Bernasconi (John Sallis (ed), *Deconstruction and Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987]p128). Derrida’s own apparently unambiguous remarks concerning the failure of Levinas’ project - the Levinas, that is, who is “resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse” (*se résout donc à trahir son intention dans son discours philosophique* 151,224) - are often qualified by more positive assertions which practically align Levinas’ writing with Derrida’s own - the declaration, for example, that “the thought

Throughout the entire seventy pages of his essay, Derrida disagrees with the reading of practically every philosopher Levinas cites. Levinas' portrayal of a reductionist Husserl who merges "the infinite alterity of the other ...to the same" is carefully rebuffed by Derrida, who sees Husserlian analogical appresentation as that which (on the contrary) "confirms and respects separation"³⁷; Levinas' Kierkegaard, from whose solipsism Levinas wishes to disassociate himself for fear of lapsing into a violent subjectivism, is also seen by Derrida to be a misunderstanding - an underestimation of Kierkegaard's "sense of the relationship to the irreducibility of

of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble" (*nous ferait trembler la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas* 82,122), or the reference to Levinas' "necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it" (*une nécessité ...de s'installer dans la conceptualité traditionnelle pour la détruire* 111,165). Remarks which, one might be forgiven for thinking, seem to give Levinas' critique a distinctly Derridean feel.

Professor Coward, near the end of an otherwise insightful and thought-provoking essay on deconstruction and Hindu negative theology, offers a reading of "Violence and Metaphysics" which completely omits the possibility of any negative critique of Levinas by Derrida. For Coward, Derrida portrays a Levinas free from "a metaphysics of logos and light", and thereby "pushes Levinas thought even further" (Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p218-9), an optimistic appraisal which does move one to ask whether Professor Coward has read the essay in its entirety, and not simply the passage he quotes. In contrast, Libertson talks of "Derrida's astonishing incomprehension of Levinas", seeing the essay as "a virulent attempt to reduce the pertinence and originality of all the Levinasian concepts..." (cit. in Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997] 131). John Llewellyn sees Derrida's essay as a questioning of "Levinas' way of questioning" the limits of metaphysics (John Llewellyn, *Emmanuel Levinas* [London: Routledge & Kegan, 1995] p176) and a declaration of Levinas' failure to see, in Heidegger and Husserl, the precedents for his own motifs. Eaglestone follows this line to a certain extent, carefully listing Derrida's objections to Levinas and ultimately re-contextualising them as 'suggested revisions', revisions which meant "in effect, that Levinas ha(d) to re-write his earlier work in new, strange and different terms" (Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, p135). In this manner, *Totality and Infinity* became Levinas' later work, *Otherwise than Being*, although the suggestion that "Violence and Metaphysics" prompted Levinas to completely re-formulate the expression of his thought, Bernasconi considers to be "a grand claim" (Sallis, *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, p129).

Bernasconi himself, in a number of studies, develops the idea of a Derrida who is not so intent on "criticising Levinas" as much as isolating "one tendency in Levinas' writings which...is compensated for elsewhere in them." (Richard Cohen (ed), *Face to Face With Levinas* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1986] p188). Bernasconi's obvious admiration for both thinkers does leave him zigzagging between the two - defending Levinas against Derrida one moment, emphasising a common resignation to "incoherent incoherence" the next (*Writing and Difference* 110, cit. in Sallis, *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, p130). If a deconstruction of Levinas has taken place (and Bernasconi uses this word carefully, given that the term was only coined four years after the writing of "Violence"), it is not an aggressive, disparaging deconstruction à la Rousseau, but rather a gentle demonstration "of the difficulty of rupturing a tradition" (ibid, p129), a difficulty common to both thinkers. Citing the Levinasian notion of how the receiver of a gift is ethically obliged to show no gratitude - a gratitude which would undermine the generosity of the giver - Bernasconi even interprets "Violence" as a "hermeneutical application" of this idea, Derrida's refusal to return the text to Levinas by reading Levinas as he would have liked (ibid, p126). In a sense, the radical ingratitude of "Violence and Metaphysics" is Derrida's act of gratitude towards Levinas.

³⁷ *Writing and Difference*, p124

the totally-other”³⁸; even Levinas’ nationalistic version of Heidegger, a thinker closer to Levinas than anyone else, is considered by Derrida to be more of an “accusation” than an interpretation, more of a gut-reaction to the “climate of Heidegger’s philosophy” than a sincere, impartial response.³⁹

Derrida’s disagreements, however, run deeper. In fact, the more one reads Derrida’s dialogue with Levinas, the more Derrida’s critique come to resemble, on a number of points, his critique of negative theology. The Levinas we encounter, a figure who feels he can nurture a relationship with the Other without ever inflicting violence upon it, becomes slightly naive. Derrida is quick to acknowledge the subtly apophatic in Levinas’ writing, a writing which moves “masterfully progressing by negations, and by negation against negation”.⁴⁰ He even calls Levinas a negative theologian, albeit one who “does not give himself the right to speak...in a language resigned to its own failure”.⁴¹ Nevertheless, in reading the early Derrida on Levinas, one always has the feeling that Levinas is simply too theological for Derrida, too keen on extolling the merits of an experience with the Ineffable, too quick to associate ‘finitude’ with ‘totality’, too easily duped - unlike Husserl - by the “illusion of the immediate presence of a plenitudinous infinity”.⁴² Why does Derrida call into question the confidence with which Levinas claims to establish “a non-violent relationship to the infinite as infinitely Other”?⁴³ What are the reasons for such scepticism, and how do they relate to Eckhart?

Of Derrida’s various objections to Levinas, three are of concern to us: firstly, that the identity of the Other is forever out of reach - one cannot conceive it without incorporating it into the Same. Secondly, as a result of this, the whole idea of “pure non-violence” is a “dream” - there is always already violence, as soon as there is meaning. Thirdly, such consequences of the Other’s untranslatable incommensurability means there is simply no way of simply escaping the violence of metaphysics through a non-linguistic ‘experience’ of the Other, which would allow

³⁸ *ibid*, p111

³⁹ *ibid*, p145

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p90

⁴¹ *ibid*, p116

⁴² *ibid*, p121

knowledge whilst still respecting dissimilarity. All of which, as we shall see, have profound implications on Eckhart's own attempts to approach God without subjecting Him to a "violence".

The absolute unthinkability of the Other forms, in a sense, the crux of Derrida's recurring problem with Levinas, an unthinkability which not even the Levinasian notion of the face as a "relation of rectitude" can mediate.⁴⁴ The moments in "Violence and Metaphysics" where Derrida stresses this adopt an ultimately sceptical tone, particularly in their insistence on the failure of language to represent the Other:

The infinitely Other would not be what it is, other, if it was a positive infinity, and if it did not maintain within itself the negativity of the indefinite, of the *apeiron*. Does not "infinitely other" primarily signify that which does not come to an end, despite my interminable labor and experience? Can one respect the Other as Other, and expel negativity - labor - from transcendence, as Levinas seeks to do? The positive Infinity (God) - if these words are meaningful - cannot be infinitely Other. If one thinks, as Levinas does, that positive Infinity tolerates, or even requires, infinite alterity, then one must renounce all language, and first of all the words *infinite* and *other*. Infinity cannot be understood as Other except in the form of the in-finite. As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas' nonnegative transcendence), the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable. Perhaps Levinas calls us toward this unthinkable-unutterable-impossible beyond (tradition's) Being and Logos. *But it must not be possible either to think or state this call.*

L'infiniment autre ne serait pas ce qu'il est autre, il s'était infinité positive et s'il ne gardait en lui la négativité de l'in-défini, de l'apeiron. "Infiniment autre" ne signifie-t-il pas d'abord ce dont je ne peux venir à bout malgré un travail et une expérience interminables? Peut-on respecter l'Autre comme Autre et chasser la négativité, le travail, hors de la transcendance comme le voudrait Levinas? L'Infini positif (Dieu), si ces mots ont un sens, ne peut pas être infiniment Autre. Si l'on pense, comme Levinas, que l'Infini positif tolère ou même exige l'altérité infinie, il faut alors renoncer à tout langage et d'abord au mot infini et au mot autre. L'infini ne s'entend comme Autre que sous la forme de l'in-fini. Dès que l'on veut penser l'Infini comme plénitude positive (pôle de la transcendance non-négative de Levinas), l'Autre devient impensable, impossible, indicible. C'est peut-être vers cet impensable-impossible-indicible que nous appelle Levinas au-delà de l'Être et du Logos (de la tradition). Mais cet appel ne doit pouvoir ni se penser ni se dire. (114,168)

Here, Derrida presents two versions of the Other: a 'false' version - the other as a "positive infinity", much like what Derrida sees as the Super-God of negative theology who is ultra-good, ultra-wise, ultra-powerful (but in an infinitely

⁴³ *ibid*, p83

⁴⁴ Levinas in interview with Richard Kearney - taken from Richard Cohen (ed), *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986) p23

ungraspable way), and a different version of the Other, which will forever contain something indefinite and uncertain (Anaximander's *apeiron*), something which is so unspeakably other that it cannot even be thought. For Derrida, Levinas' delusion is that he clearly feels his *L'Autre* to be the Other of the second category, but it actually never gets beyond the first.

In other words, whereas Derrida's Other would be *différance* itself, an other which would forever disappear in showing itself, which would forever be 'otherwise' than being, Levinas' Other would be what Derrida understands as the God of negative theology, an Other of *deferred* presence, a *positive* Infinity which "cannot ever be infinitely Other" because it is 'beyond being', not 'otherwise than being' - a crucial distinction. It is therefore no coincidence that the first serious attention given to Eckhart in Derrida's *oeuvre* - that is, the first time he explicitly takes on the claims of negative theology - occurs within the pages of "Violence and Metaphysics", and involves Eckhart's oft-cited insistence on not having contested the Being of God, but on the contrary of having affirmed it on a higher level. When Derrida criticises this, he clearly has in mind Levinas, who contests the violence of metaphysics on one level, only to re-affirm it on another.

Such violence for Derrida manifests itself in Levinas' discourse through his notion of the *face*. Derrida is suspicious of this term for two reasons: first, because of its religious connotations - Levinas' 'face' is not the "vis-à-vis of two equal and upright men", but the face-to-face of the suppliant believer, "with bent neck and eyes raised towards the God on high".⁴⁵ Secondly, and more importantly, the notion of the face of the Other re-introduces an element of metaphysics and self-identity into Levinas' discourse, particularly since Levinas often uses the word as a synonym for "substance". "The face" concludes Derrida, "is presence, *ousia*".⁴⁶

Why is this necessarily a problem in a discourse of alleged non-violence? Because presence is originally violent. "Presence as violence is the meaning of finitude..." (*La présence comme violence est le sens de la finitude*).⁴⁷ As soon as the Other acquires a face, a certain violence has already taken place. As soon as the

⁴⁵ *Writing and Difference*, p107

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p101

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p133, 195

Other is here for us, as soon as the Other *means* something to us, we have already inflicted a violence upon it - how could it ever be otherwise? As Derrida remarks elsewhere, what manner of “unheard of graphics” could ever represent the truly infinite Other?⁴⁸ Or as Eckhart says, in a sermon Derrida has never cited and possibly never read: “If you visualize anything or if anything enters your mind, that is not God”.⁴⁹ Levinas’ error is to have underestimated the inescapability of metaphysics - and consequently the unavoidability of violence.

Hence Levinas’ “dream” and his recourse to “experience”.⁵⁰ For Derrida, both Rousseau and Levinas are dreamers - obsessed with the *rêve* of recovering an originary presence, in Rousseau’s case a lost innocence, in Levinas’ case the irreducible ‘identity’ of the Other. Levinas’ dream is that he can reach the Other non-violently, via an ‘experience’ which would pole-vault one out of language and into the immediate presence of the Other. A dream about which Derrida clearly has no illusions:

The experience of the other (of the infinite) is irreducible, and is therefore “the experience par excellence” (*Totality and Infinity*)...But can one speak of an *experience* of the other or of difference? Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence?

L’expérience de l’autre (de l’infini) est irréductible, elle est donc “l’expérience par excellence” (Totalité et Infinité).Mais peut-on parler d’une expérience de l’autre ou de la différence? Le concept de l’expérience n’a-t-il pas toujours été déterminé par la métaphysique de la présence? (152, 225)

To dream of an interpretation-free, signless ‘experience’ of the Other, an Other which would retain the impossible simultaneity of the familiar and the unfamiliar, an Other which could *mean* without being violated...such a dream of pure identity Derrida can never accept, as we have learnt elsewhere. “From the moment there is meaning, there is nothing but signs”.⁵¹ Levinas’ dream of non-violently welcoming the Other can only take place with the retention of a certain hope: the hope of overcoming

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p111

⁴⁹ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p125, from the sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus*

⁵⁰ Although the focus is on Levinas here, it is interesting to note how Husserl himself, in his final years, could describe his hopes for a rigorous phenomenology - a “serious, rigorous, indeed apodictically rigorous science” - as nothing more than a “dream”. “The dream is over” he writes in his journal, three years before his death (see *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr, [Chicago: Northwestern University Press 1970] Appendix IX, p389 - cit. in David Bell, *Husserl* [London: Routledge & Kegan, 1990] p232)

metaphysics by going “beyond” it. A hope which, even in the most generous moments of Derrida’s essay, is only ever translated as naïveté - an ultimate ignorance of the fact that metaphysics has already “forever protected itself against every absolutely *surprising* convocation” (*s’est protégée à jamais contre toute convocation absolument surprenante*).⁵² Words such as ‘infinite’ and ‘other’ can never “surprise” metaphysics, for they already belong to it. Just as it is no coincidence to find Meister Eckhart within the pages of “Violence”, it is equally no coincidence to find, in the closing pages, the words of Nicholas of Cusa, Eckhart’s passionate admirer: “Every question concerning God presupposeth his identity”.⁵³ Derrida’s intention in quoting the fifteenth-century master is subtle but unambiguous - Levinas’ attempts to question metaphysics presupposes metaphysics, just as Cusano’s God is forever affirmed, even when one questions His existence.

To recap, with respect to Eckhart: Derrida agrees with both Levinas and Eckhart on the violence of the mimetic, on the synonymy of comprehension and assimilation. It is with the response to such violence upon the Other that the differences begin. For Derrida, Levinas and Eckhart share the same “dream”, a non-metaphysical encounter with the Other, and thereby fall victim to the same deconstructive critique - that of chaining themselves to the desire for the elusive, irreducible identity of the Other, which for Levinas is “the experience par excellence”, and for Eckhart the “secret of the eternal Godhead”. “Violence and Metaphysics” is, in a sense, an examination of the impossibility of such a project. Derrida cannot share this dream of non-violent knowledge: “Like pure violence, pure non-violence is a contradictory concept”.⁵⁴ It is the notion of ‘purity’, the purity of the Other, a purity one can violate and pollute with an ‘impure’ language, which

⁵¹ *Of Grammatology*, p52

⁵² *Writing and Difference*, p153, 227

⁵³ *ibid*, p150. In Nicholas’ own library at Cues (or Cusa), on the river Moselle, the fifteenth century churchman had in his possession *Codex 21*, one of the largest collections of Eckhart’s latin scholastic works. However, it was in a theological quarrel with the traditionalist theologian von Herrenberg that the Eckhartian influences of Cusano’s works (particularly *Of Learned Ignorance*) were pointed out. For von Herrenberg at that time, ‘Eckhartian’ is clearly just another word for ‘heretical’. Cusano was, in turn, prompted to defend “Magister Eghardus” at some length in his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1448). For more on this, see Giorgio Penzo’s *Invito al Pensiero di Eckhart* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997)

constitutes the essential difference between Derrida's idea of alterity and the versions (and I stress the word 'versions') of Eckhart and Levinas he deconstructs. For Levinasian *violence* and Eckhartian *gewalt* are a consequence of this dream of purity, a purity whose ultimate deconstruction would remove the need for both words, "violence" and "non-violence". A question which, although tangential to our project, does make one wonder whether Derrida, in deconstructing 'purity', can still use the word 'violence' at all. Nevertheless, however tempted one might be to conclude with this Derridean scepticism of Levinas' position, recent remarks made by Derrida vis-à-vis Levinas' legacy do suggest a slight shift on Derrida's part towards a possible language of non-violence, and merit some consideration on their own.

Recent Remarks: Openness Towards the Other.

Having gone to some lengths to emphasise a certain deconstructive scepticism in Derrida, particularly towards the notion of the 'experience' of the Other and the "dream" of non-violence, we have proposed a Derrida who sees an unavoidable element of originary violence in all discourse (like Eckhart and Levinas), but can neither envisage a reception of the Other 'outside' discourse, nor a non-violent encounter with the Other 'inside' discourse (unlike Eckhart and Levinas). Such a conclusion would certainly undermine the contention that a similar terminology of 'openness' and 'emptiness' towards the Other exists in both Eckhart and Derrida. However, certain remarks of Derrida's in recent years concerning his relationship to Levinas do throw a different light on Derridean alterity, and make us wonder whether Derrida really is as sceptical about the welcome of the Other as the author "Violence and Metaphysics" would have us believe. What I would now like to do is take the remarks from two recent seminars of Derrida's, and show how Derrida's re-appraisal of his position vis-à-vis Levinas indirectly brings him closer to Eckhartian *gelâzenheit*.

At a seminar in 1983, almost twenty years after the writing of "Violence", Derrida says in a reply to André Jacob:

⁵⁴ *Writing and Difference*, p146

Before a thought such as that of Levinas, I have never really had any objections. I am ready to subscribe to everything he said. That doesn't mean that I think the same thing in the same way; but the differences are very difficult to determine: what does it mean, in this case, the difference of idiom, of language, of writing? I have tried to pose a certain number of questions to Levinas in reading him...but this is not in the order of a disagreement or a distance. (own translation)

Devant une pensée comme celle de Lévinas, je n'ai jamais d'objection. Je suis prêt à souscrire à tout ce qu'il dit. Ça ne veut pas dire que je pense la même chose de la même façon; mais là les différences sont très difficiles à déterminer: que signifie dans ce cas-là la différence d'idiome, de langue, d'écriture? J'ai essayé de poser un certain nombre de questions à Lévinas en le lisant...mais ce qui se passe là n'est pas de l'ordre du désaccord ou de la distance.⁵⁵

This gradual revelation of a deeper affinity between the two thinkers has puzzled some critics (Critchley: "...if there indeed exists this happy *homioiosis* between Levinas and Derrida...then what on earth is Derrida doing in his extended, and at times highly critical, 1964 monograph on Levinas?"⁵⁶), although there are a number of possible reasons why this should not be so. Firstly, certain moments in the evolution of Derrida's later thought (most notably Derrida's 1980 essay on Levinas "En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici"⁵⁷) do show indications of an increasing sympathy towards Levinas. Secondly, the Levinas Derrida feels such a deep affinity with in *Altérités* may not be so much the early Levinas of *Totality and Infinity*, but more the later Levinas of *Otherwise Than Being*, if we are to believe the suggestions that Levinas' 1974 work was, in many ways, a revision of *Totality* prompted by Derrida's early deconstruction of him. Finally, there may well be moments, as we shall see, in Derrida's "highly critical 1964 monograph" which indicate a common core of thought between them.

It is with the mention of a 'common core of thought' in Levinas and Derrida that our argument moves closer to Eckhart. What exactly is it in Levinas that Derrida feels he can "subscribe" to? Ten years later, in a 1996 seminar, Derrida explains:

Everything I have tried to say here implies something I share with Levinas, that is the absolute irreducibility of the otherness of the other. The other, even if he or she is a finite being, is infinitely other, and this infinity is precisely what

⁵⁵ *Altérités* (Paris: Éditions Osiris, 1986) p74

⁵⁶ Nick Midgley(ed), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction* (Coventry: Parousia Press, 1997) p94

⁵⁷ found in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987) pp159-203

resists any reappropriation...And that's why the coming of the other is totally unpredictable.⁵⁸

The Other, like the text, resists all appropriation - its infinite alterity forever eludes "the empire of the same", as Derrida says elsewhere. What is the proper response to such unpredictable irreducibility? Here Derrida brings his appeal to "absolute openness" into play, an idea we briefly examined at the end of the last chapter:

What I call messianicity without messianism refers to the promise of something or someone to come in such a way that does not anticipate at all what or who will come, when or where. An absolute openness to what is coming.⁵⁹

Despite all of the reservations expressed in "Violence", this "absolute openness" does seem to move nearer to the spirit of *Gelassenheit*. This is by no means surprising - Derrida had already written how, through "permitting to let be others in their truth...the thought of Being is thus as close as possible to non-violence".⁶⁰ As close as possible, but never *completely* non-violent, for "[T]he thought of Being, in its unveiling, is never foreign to a certain violence" (*La pensée de l'être n'est donc jamais, dans son dévoilement, étrangère à une certaine violence*).⁶¹ In a sense, Derrida reproduces Heidegger's openness towards Being whilst simultaneously de-theologising it, retaining the *Offenheit* but removing the *Sein*, and thereby removing the horizon of expectation which must necessarily accompany it. It is a notion of absolute 'emptiness' and messianic 'openness' which, we will recall, did have its moments in "Violence and Metaphysics", although they remained undeveloped:

Philosophy...can only open itself to the question, within it and by it. It can only let itself be questioned. (131)

Truthfully, messianic eschatology is never mentioned literally: it is but a question of designating a space or hollow within naked experience where this eschatology can be understood and where it must resonate. This hollow space is not an opening among others. It is an opening itself, the opening of opening...(83)

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p13

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p3

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p146

⁶¹ *ibid*, p147, 218

Whether such an openness towards the Other can ever become, as in Eckhart, a receptacle for the Other, is our question. The “hollow space” is certainly never intended to be filled, as its ‘hollowness’ is the condition of its openness towards others. Eckhart’s sermons often feature such metaphors of ‘emptiness’ and ‘openness’, metaphors which produce some resemblance to Derrida’s own terms, despite their radically different contexts:

...[good people] are turned outwards to all in divine life and in complete openness [*ledeger offenung*] in a way that is beyond their own control.

...but rather I remained free and empty in this present moment for the most precious will of God...(Intravit Jesus)

...God [must] perform great works in you...in so far as he finds you empty and bare...(Et cum factus esset)⁶²

Such an insistence on remaining *offen* towards God - how far does it resemble, and differ from, the Derridean openness towards the play of the Other? Is this the case of an analogous metaphor, or have we simply strayed upon two fortuitous adjectives - *offen* and *ouvert*, two deceptively similar images of receptivity which actually belong to completely dissimilar vocabularies?

Derrida himself supplies at least one good reason why any similarities between two such vocabularies of ‘openness’ are worth some investigation. In his 1992 essay on negative theology, “Post-Scriptum”, he writes, in remarking upon the thought of *Gelassenheit* in Eckhart and Silesius:

...the abandonment to this *Gelassenheit* does not exclude pleasure or enjoyment ; on the contrary, it gives rise to them. It opens the play of God (of God and with God, of God with self and with creation)...

...l’abandon à cette *Gelassenheit* n’exclut pas le plaisir ou la jouissance, il leur donne lieu au contraire. Il ouvre le jeu de Dieu (de Dieu et avec Dieu, de Dieu avec soi et avec la création)...⁶³

Il ouvre le jeu de Dieu: Derrida clearly sees Eckhartian *gelâzenheit* not as a medieval version of a homely pietism, but as a strategy which joyfully embarks upon a kind of play with God, within an opening where both God and self can meet. Admittedly,

⁶² quotations from (in order): Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p245, F.Jostes, *Meister Eckhart und seine Jünger* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972) 93; *ibid*, p159; *ibid*, p226

⁶³ “Post-Scriptum”, Coward and Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p317, *Sauf le nom* 102

this is a passage where Derrida is keen to identify the relative merits of God-centred *Gelassenheit* within an essay whose ultimate aim is however to deconstruct such a concept. Nevertheless, the fact that Derrida is willing to acknowledge Eckhart's *gelâzenheit* as the initiation of play, and *not* as an attempt to close it, should at least encourage us to examine the two versions of 'openness' further.

If there are any deeper similarities to be found, the first certainly lies in both Derrida and Eckhart's ironic proposal that not anticipating the arrival of the Other is the only way to welcome it. As soon as we attempt to associate an image, or a name, or an expectation to the Other, we no longer truly respect its alterity, but merely extend our "empire of the same". In a sense, we have to be 'surprised':

Unless the event is so surprising that I am not even prepared for the surprise, it is not an event. It is the same with the other: the otherness of the other, the experience of the otherness of the other implies that the other may come when I am totally unprepared: that is the condition of the other remaining other.⁶⁴

The "otherness of the other" manifests itself so suddenly that there is no time for preconceptions - in this unexpectedness, indeed *only* in this unexpectedness, can the otherness of the other truly be. In such a moment of complete surprise, the Other finds us in an 'empty' and 'open' state, momentarily free of any pre-planned response to it. Derrida glimpses this moment of surprise as the only possible way of welcoming the Other. He links the originary otherness of the Other, with impressive originality, to the unknowable moment of the Other's arrival - the Other can only be truly Other if it surprises us. This association of chronology and alterity does not take place in Eckhart: the Lord may indeed come like a thief in the night, but His ineffability is not in any way dependent upon the uncertain moment of His arrival.

Eckhart insists so often on 'preparing' the ground of the soul for God, that at first glance, it would seem to be a complete contradiction of Derrida's advocating of 'unpreparedness'. A contradiction, that is, until we actually look at what Eckhart means by "preparedness" or *bereitschaft*. In both Eckhartian 'emptiness' and Derridean 'openness', an analogous idea is developed in different terms: just as Derrida feels he can welcome the Other only by remaining completely open and unprepared for it, Eckhart ironically insists we can only "prepare" ourselves for God

by ‘emptying’ ourselves of all so-called preparations - names, concepts, ideas. The failure to achieve this emptiness results in *unbereitschaft* or “unpreparedness”, a cluttering up of the soul with obstructive conceptions:

But we do violence to Him and wrong by obstructing Him in his natural work through our unpreparedness.⁶⁵

The number of Zen commentaries who have linked this Eckhartian emptiness with eastern concepts such as *sunyata* (hollowness) or *wu-nien* (no-thought) is legion, and needs no reiteration here. What is interesting, however, is how an analogous understanding of the concept as violent and obstructive in Eckhart and Derrida leads them to an analogous insistence on their abandonment, and the extolling of a “complete openness” (*ledeger offenung*) which would let the Other be Other, would let God be God.

Another similarity which both Eckhart and Derrida’s emphasis on ‘openness’ share is their emphasis on the uniqueness of the Other, which in Derrida is understood as irreplaceability, and in Eckhart becomes ineffability. The fact that there is nothing we know which is in any way similar to the Other is precisely that irreducibility which gives the Other its otherness. Our acknowledgement of the singularity of the Other is an essential part of our respect for it:

Hospitality is always offered to someone in the singular. The otherness of the other who comes to me is singular, he is irreplaceable by any other one, hospitality is offered to an irreplaceable other as a singularity.⁶⁶

Like Derrida’s inimitably singular Other, Eckhart’s God is “a being to whom nothing is, or can be, similar”. Eckhart’s God is absolutely unique. Naturally, this does not mean that ‘irreplaceable’ is synonymous with ‘ineffable’, but simply that both writers’ non-violent openness to the Other hinges upon a simple fact: that there is nothing in our vocabulary which can ever reduce the identity of the Other to our Same. The Other is, as Eckhart says, an “I do not know what” (*neizwaz*)⁶⁷, and must remain so if its Otherness is not to be vanquished.

⁶⁴ Midgley, *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, p2

⁶⁵ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p41

⁶⁶ from the discussion “Perhaps or Maybe”, Midgley, *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, p6

⁶⁷ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, from the sermon *Surrexit autem Paulus*

The differences remain, however. How complete is Eckhart's "complete openness, if it still contains the word 'God'? How "free and untrammelled" is Eckhart's reception of the Other? The fact that, for Eckhart, certain concepts concerning God have to be completely abandoned, including the idea that God is good, wise, merciful, does suggest a *ledeger offenung*, a complete disarming of all notions and images. It is a gesture Derrida would certainly see as 'open' and non-violent - "conceptual framework(s)" being "the first violence of all commentary".⁶⁸ Derrida, as we have already seen, has commented on how negative theology "lets passage, lets the other be", although there are reasons to suggest why Derrida would not feel Eckhart's 'openness' to be "completely open". As we saw, Derrida's "messianicity without messianism" involves remaining open for something or someone, without anticipating them at all. In speaking of the tradition in Jewish families whereby a place is kept free at the dinner table in anticipation of Elijah, Derrida remarks:

But what I mean by messianicity is not only pre-messianic, it is also pre-Elijah, it must remain *totally open* [italics mine]. But I am unhappy with this 'open', it may have the connotation of the horizon, in the sense of being open to what may come or not. But I am not even open to *that*...⁶⁹

In contrast to Derrida, Eckhart's openness would, presumably, be 'messianicity *with* messianism', not without. Eckhart's God (and here we return to Derrida's long-abiding caveat concerning negative theology) would still be a *presence*, and Eckhart's openness the expectation of a presence, the anticipation of *ousia*, an emptiness waiting to be filled. Admittedly, this logocentric reading of Eckhart's openness to God is facilitated by some of Eckhart's own terms, such as "potential receptivity" - to receive the Other is to already have an idea of what the Other is. For Derrida, the Eckhartian soul will never be "totally open", because it is still open towards a God - and thereby still carries with it all the "connotation(s) of the horizon". Which, in a way, re-emphasizes the most obvious difference between Eckhartian emptiness and Derridean openness; where Derrida's *ouverture* would be an openness to play (the play of the Other, the play of the world), Eckhart's

⁶⁸ *Writing and Difference*, p312, note 7

⁶⁹ Midgley, *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, p4

emptiness is an openness towards God, and ultimately part of a move towards union with the Other. In effect, *gelâzenheit* is an initial step towards succumbing to the violence of God.

In brief: the examination of an analogous openness towards the Other in Eckhart and Derrida is initially forestalled in “Violence and Metaphysics”, where Derrida seems to be at his most sceptical concerning the non-violent accessibility to the Other. The ineluctable violence of all discourse, the inescapability of metaphysics and its imperialism of *theoria*, the illusion of an ‘experience’ somehow outside discourse, the impossible “dream” of ever reaching the pure, irreducible identity of the Other...all of Derrida’s early objections to Levinas ultimately comment on the failure of Eckhart’s own discourse. It is only within the pages of a Derrida who has grown more sympathetic to Levinas (or, as you will, a Derrida whom Levinas has come to resemble) that the beginnings of a genuine comparison between Derridean ‘openness’ and Eckhartian *gelâzenheit* can be undertaken. Two vocabularies which not only agree on the synonymy of the violent and the metaphysical, but also emphasize, in an analogous though not identical manner, the complete irreducibility of the Other, an Other which is absolutely unique and whose utter alterity can only be respected through the complete abandonment of all anticipatory apparatus and conceptual machinery. In other words, an ‘openness’ would not attempt to ‘think’ the Other and thereby close one to the unexpected and the non-anticipated.

What remains to be understood, however, within the terms of this thesis, is exactly why both Derrida and Eckhart’s understanding of Otherness is necessarily ‘joyful’ - and for this we must turn, finally and briefly, to the notion of the gift.

4.1.3 The Affirmation of the Mystery: Versions of the Gift.

Die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen und die Offenheit für das Geheimnis gehören zusammen.

Wenn die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen und die Offenheit für das Geheimnis in uns erwachen, dann dürften wir auf einen Weg gelangen, der zu einem neuen Grund und Boden führt.

Letting-be before things and the openness to the mystery belong together.

If letting-be before things and the openness to the mystery awake in us, then we should arrive at a path which will lead to a new ground and foundation.

-Heidegger⁷⁰

The whole point of this chapter has been to try and show, with various reservations and caveats, how the 'letting-be' of Eckhart and the 'openness' of Derrida can, to use Heidegger's phrase, belong together. A sentiment I would finally like to underline with the notion of the gift.

In not only Eckhart and Derrida but also Heidegger and Levinas, the word "gift" recurs as a central motif in the manifestation of the Other: *le don, die gâbe, le cadeau, das Geschenk*. Of course, we are juggling versions of *Gelassenheit* here, risking a juxtaposition of discourses which belong to *radically different contexts*: the emptiness of the soul to the passage of the Godhead, the openness of *Dasein* to the inscrutable play of Being, the openness of Levinas to the face of the Other, the openness of the *ouverture* to the play of the world, to the play of the text.

In a similar fashion, the various versions of the gift implied by such thinkers also accrue ultimately different meanings: the gift of the Word in the ground of the soul, the gift of the thought of Being (*es gibt Sein*), the gift of the Other, the gift of the text - this last gift a gift which cannot and should not ever be returned to the giver. To compare all these versions of the gift, particularly Derrida's own extended consideration of the act of giving in works such as *Donner le Temps* and "Dans cet ouvrage", would require an entire chapter in itself and would prevent us from making our single and most relevant point - that of the positive reception and response to Otherness in Eckhart and Derrida.

A response which affirms the uncertainty of the Other as that which *gives*. The "mystery" of the Other in both Eckhart and Derrida *gives*, and gives endlessly,

⁷⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund [London: Harper & Row, 1966])p55-6

uncontrollably, unpredictably. It gives and does not *take*. In contrast (as we shall see) to the mysterious entities of Kafka and Pinter, the nameless, enigmatic Other which arrests and punishes unconditionally, inexplicably, Derrida and Eckhart affirm an Other whose opening provides an endless possibility for play - regardless of whether this is the play between God and the self, between the Other and the Same, between the reader and the text.

Moreover, the gift of the Other can only come about when one respects the mystery of the Other as an "I know not what" (*neizwaz*) - when one refuses, as Derrida puts it, to "inscrib(e) the wholly other within the empire of the same".⁷¹ In Eckhart's terms, the gift or *gâbe* - which is the birth of the Word in the ground of the soul - can only be given when one is empty of all conceptions of God and completely open to Him, as "empty and free as God is empty and free in himself" (...*ledic und vrî zemâle, als got ledic und vrî ist in im selber*).⁷² The gift is not simply enabled by openness - the gift is openness itself. Derrida summarises this idea succinctly in a note on Heidegger's "Zeit und Sein": "...the thinking of the gift opens up the space in which Being and time give themselves and give themselves to thought".⁷³ The thinking of the gift opens up the clearing of *Dasein*, just as the thinking of *Gelassenheit* opens up the play of God. Opening up oneself to the Other - regardless of whether the Other signifies Derridean play, Eckhart's Godhead or Heidegger's *Geheimnis* - involves the acceptance of this gift of the Other, of this giving without return.

The opposition we have just made and are ready to explore in the next chapter - that of a positive, productive, giving version of the Mystery of the Other in negative theology and deconstruction, as opposed to the malevolent Other of hidden menace we find in Kafka and Pinter - could be undermined by a look at some of the ambiguities attached to the advent of the Other in Derrida. Although Eckhart's Other may well be a God of Love, the *autre* of Derrida is ominously referred to as the "as

⁷¹ from "At this very moment in this very work" in Peggy Kamuf (ed), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p412

⁷² Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p163, from the sermon *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum* - Sermon 2 in Quint, 1:40

⁷³ "How to Avoid Speaking : Denials" in Coward and Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p140 n.27

yet unnameable”(l’*encore innomable*)⁷⁴, an Other which “can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger”⁷⁵, an imminent birth which may yet result in a “terrifying form of monstrosity” (*la forme terrifiante de la monstruosité*).⁷⁶ Such uncertainty, one might feel, seems to lie rather more on the side of the woeful than the joyful. What exactly does the ‘gift of the Other’ bode for Derrida? Is it good news or bad? The fact that the word ‘gift’ means ‘poison’ in German (a coincidence Derrida has more than once remarked upon) does remind us of the fundamental uncertainty of that original gift of writing, the *pharmakon* - undecidably poison or cure.

However, it would not be wrong to suggest that such fundamental ambiguity is a necessary element of the Other, a point Derrida has underlined in a recent seminar. Concerning the various risks in remaining “absolutely open to the Other”, Düttman suggested the possibility of the Other being radically “radically evil”. Derrida’s response to this is interesting, as it affirms the sinister possibility of menace as the very condition for absolute otherness:

For an event to happen, the possibility of the worst, of radical evil, must remain a possibility, something that may indeed happen. Otherwise the good event, the good Messiah, could not happen either.⁷⁷

Derrida does not affirm the ‘goodness’ of the Other - he affirms the uncertainty of the Other, and for this uncertainty to be genuine the possibility of “radical evil” must remain inscribed. It is a mixture of chance and peril which we are familiar with in Derrida - *en jeu* sometimes being translated by the expression ‘at stake’, more often by the more neutral ‘in play’. It is the reason why Derrida sometimes refers to the “seminal adventure of the trace” as precisely that, an “adventure”, and sometimes as a “risk”. The “joyous affirmation of the play of the world” would affirm this very risk, the affirmation of the play of the Other.⁷⁸

Such an ethical ambiguity does not seem to present itself in Eckhart’s version of the Other. Whether Eckhart, for all his “emptiness”, could ever have envisaged a

⁷⁴ *Writing and Difference*, p293, 428, *Of Grammatology* p14

⁷⁵ *Of Grammatology*, p5

⁷⁶ *Writing and Difference*, p293

⁷⁷ Midgley, *Responsibilities*, p9

⁷⁸ both phrases taken from *Writing and Difference*, p292

divine Other which retained the capacity for 'radical evil' an Other which might genuinely wish us harm, remains a difficult question for Eckhartian scholarship. Heideggerean scholars such as Caputo and Hühnerfeld are insistent he could not have. Caputo goes to some lengths to show how Heidegger's Being, in contrast to Eckhart's God of Love, is "by no means 'fatherly' or 'loving' or 'benevolent'".⁷⁹ He quotes Eckhart's *Book of Divine Consolation*: "Love cannot distrust, it trustfully awaits only good"⁸⁰, and Hühnerfeld agrees, remarking:

Meister Eckhart would never have taken the mystical step if he had believed that he was leaping into Nothingness instead of into the arms of God.⁸¹

A remark slightly undermined by the fact that, in many sermons, Eckhart *did* call God a "Nothingness", admittedly an incommensurable no-thingness which is hardly synonymous with the Nothingness of "What is Metaphysics?". Ultimately, both Hühnerfeld and Caputo's insistence on Eckhart's God being a God of New Testament love does seem to leave out the God of Job, the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Exodus. *Can* one affirm a God of Love in negative theology, as writers such as Caputo, Jean Luc Marion and Kevin Hart have tried to, without reinscribing the onto-theo-logic? *Can* one remain "totally open" (to use Derrida's phrase) to a God one has already precomprehended as 'loving'?

Such questions must be considered in the final chapter. For now, it merely serves to underline how both Derrida and Eckhart present a positive, *giving* version of the Other, even if - in the case of Derrida - the nature of the gift/*Gift* remains ambiguous. Both thinkers see the advent of the Other as that which should encourage openness, not closure, regardless of whether the Other is caring or malevolent, a God of Love or a bearer of malice. An affirming thought of Otherness which leads us appropriately into Pinter, and how the uncertainty of the Other offers very little reason to be joyful.

⁷⁹ John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978) p247

⁸⁰ cit. in Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, p246

⁸¹ Hühnerfeld's *The Heidegger Affair: An Essay Upon a German Genius*, p125, cit. in Caputo, *The Mystical Element*, p245

4.2 The Violence of the Mystery: A Neoplatonic Reading of *The Birthday Party*.

The relation with the Other is the relation with a Mystery.
 -Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*¹

In Levinas, Derrida and Eckhart, as we see from the remark, the mystery of the Other is a mystery to be welcomed. The aim of this section is to contrast this positive reception of otherness with the dark, mysterious entities which lurk ineffably outside Pinter's rooms; to show how the menace of the Other in Pinter makes use of the same vocabularies of negative theology and Neoplatonism, but as a means towards groundless malice, not groundless love.

Near the beginning of Kafka's famous letter to his father, *Brief an den Vater*, he relates an incident from his childhood which, in many ways, serves as an appropriate starting point for our investigation of the Other in Pinter. One night, as a small child, the young Franz is whimpering and crying for a glass of water. After shouting various threats at the child in an attempt to silence his cries, the father charges suddenly into young Franz's room, pulls the child out of bed, carries him downstairs and throws him out on to the street. Kafka writes:

Years later I still suffered from the tormenting possibility, that the giant, my father, would come for me at the last moment without reason and drag me, in the night, out of my bed and onto the street, and that I therefore meant nothing to him.²

One can imagine the scene vividly, and it would not be difficult to extrapolate - with psychoanalytical glee - the appropriate elements of the adult Kafka's *Weltanschauung* from the young child's trauma: the unexpected provenance of the assault, the absurdity of the father's anger, the helplessness of the small child before the 'giant'⁸, the subject's conviction of self-worthlessness, not to mention the unsettling possibility that the menace of the unfamiliar may actually spring out at you from the familiar - the *unheimliche* emerging from the *heimlich*, as it were.

¹ cit in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978) p142

² *Brief an den Vater*, p11, own translation (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1962)

It is an episode which, for all its biographical interest, does seem to give the phrase 'the advent of the Other' a sinister twist. The Other who appears from nowhere, for no reason, to pull us from our beds, march us out of our homes - the Other who wishes to do us harm.

The aim of this section, therefore, is to continue exploring the theme of the relationship with the Other, but in the light of Pinter, not Derrida or Eckhart. To explore what really does happen when the Other becomes, to use Düttman's words, "radically evil".³ We will also examine how a different kind of uncertainty pervades *The Birthday Party* - not the undecidable oscillation between alternative sets of data which will be found in *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, but a much more 'classical' use of uncertainty as a mystery, the withdrawal of key information from the fabric of the play.

After a provisional review of *The Birthday Party's* critical background, along with its essential precedents in Kafka and Hemingway, we shall undertake a highly individual reading of the play as a perverse version of Eckhart's Neoplatonism. Such a reading will compare the gradual struggle, breakdown, subjugation and assimilation of Stanley with the progress of the Eckhartian soul as it loses, in various stages, its individuality, selfhood, reason and sight in order to return, in silence, to the Absolute One.

4.2.1 Recent Re-readings of *The Birthday Party*.

Exactly whether Pinter criticism is, as Quigley has said, "proliferating but not progressing"⁴, still remains a matter of debate - *The Birthday Party* certainly seems to have moved in a number of unexpected directions, readings which - at least in one case - shift the responsibility for Stanley's destruction onto the shoulders of Stanley himself, and away from the agents of a nameless, lurking power. Rather than move through the by-now familiar succession of interpretations (Cohn's savaging by the System, Dukore's transformation of the individual, John Russell Brown's technical

³ Nick Midgley (ed), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction* (Coventry: Parousia Press, 1997) p9

⁴ Anthony Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975) p4

study of the play's language), I would like to briefly consider two or three of the play's most recent and more important critical re-evaluations, before going on to examine how the play's more Neoplatonic echoes relate to this thesis.

Elizabeth Sakellaridou's 1988 study, *Pinter's Female Portraits*, is keen - as the title suggests - to examine the female characters in *The Birthday Party*, both of which "have subsidiary roles and are presented in an unflattering light".⁵ In a welcome break from the male-dominated tradition of Pinter-crit, where barely half a dozen female names stand out with any real significance (Cohn, Merris, Morrison, Prentice), Sakellaridou develops a version of *The Birthday Party* as a play where "the feminine principle is seen in continuous decline" (33). Although such a negative note is only seen as an early stage in Pinter's gradual progress towards an "ideal" state of androgyny in his characters, the male characters we are usually inclined to feel sympathetic with in the play (Petey and Stanley) suffer badly in Sakellaridou's study. Stanley is a "doomed, impotent creature of indefinite gender" (40), whilst Petey is perceived as a "lower-class, frustrated man of average intelligence". Two such mediocre and dependent individuals are obviously in need of a mother figure - which is precisely where Sakellaridou invokes Jung's eternal, abiding mother archetype to provide her description of Meg. Drawing on sociological texts such as *Families Under Stress* (1975) and *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Meg's apparent "silliness and sluttishness" (43) and unnatural attachment to Stanley is rendered more justifiable by the "actual sterility" of her own marriage. Sakellaridou blames the negative and derogatory image of Meg on Pinter's structuring of the play, which encourages us to focus on Meg's deficiencies, without suggesting that Petey may be in some way responsible for them.

Male characters in *The Birthday Party* come out badly once more in the work of another female critic - Penelope Prentice's 1994 work, *The Pinter Ethic*.⁶ As the single, consistent premise throughout the book is that Pinter's plays proffer "an ethic [which] promotes life-enhancing values of love and justice" (41), namely through a criticism of 'victim-mentality' and a re-emphasis on one's own individual responsibility, it is not surprising to find both Stanley and Petey guilty of an "inertia"

⁵Elizabeth Sakellaridou, *Pinter's Female Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1988) p50

(25). This rather harsh equation of victim with villain does set Prentice, as she herself acknowledges, against the overwhelming majority of critics - as does her unlikely speculations that Goldberg and McCann have not been sent specially for Stanley but have simply stumbled upon him by chance.

Although Prentice's argument, which essentially deconstructs the victim/villain relationship in *The Birthday Party* and thereby acknowledges our "kinship with Stanley" (41), is impressively argued, her insistence on the individual responsibility of Stanley's actions as robbing Goldberg of any notion of villainy does become slightly unsettling. It is an argument which seems to spring from the more idealistic expressions of the French existentialists, and does lead Prentice to make some odd points - her contention that Stanley "provokes" his own interrogation by asking the visitors to leave, for example (33). Or his remark that, on witnessing Goldberg stutter and stumble, "we sympathise when Goldberg momentarily stoops to the precipice to confront the hollowness of his authority" (28). There is, no doubt, obvious worth in this all-questioning approach to Stanley's 'victimhood' - Prentice cites Francis Gillen's remark that Stanley could easily have become Meg's torturer (41). Nevertheless, Pinter's own admission that the knock on Stanley's door came from his "knowledge of the Gestapo", an admission Prentice cites at the end of her chapter, does perhaps suggest that some victim/villain relationships are better left undeconstructed.

4.2.2 "The Killers", *The Trial* and *The Birthday Party*: Introducing Malice into Uncertainty.

Criticism exploring the various links between Kafka's novel, Hemingway's story and Pinter's play is by no means as abundant as the obvious similarities between the three texts would lead one to expect. Practically every critic writing on *The Birthday Party* makes some mention of Kafka, as if to fulfil the ritual obligations of some unspoken tradition, although few critics dwell on the implications of "The Killers" and *The*

⁶ Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic* (London: Garland, 1994)

Trial for more than a paragraph.⁷ There is, no doubt, a fear of stating the obvious in all this - three unusually similar accounts, all developing, if not concluding, in the same way: the arrival of two mysterious henchmen, of unknown provenance, in search of the protagonist for an unspecified reason. Like Kafka's childhood trauma, all three involve the manifestation of the unfamiliar in what (for the protagonist) would be the very heart of the familiar: Stanley's bedsit, Josef K.'s living room, the lunch counter where Ole Andreson has his dinner every day. Even certain stock-figures bear a resemblance to one another - the figure of the landlady, for example, represented by Meg, Mrs Bell and Frau Grubach. All three exacerbate the cruel menace inherent in the texts in an analogous manner: the maternal kindness and understanding which they provide is rendered unbearably pathetic by their incomprehension of the danger the protagonist lies in, creating a cheery pathos - what Graham Greene would call the "baseless optimism that is so much more appalling than our despair".⁸

In all three texts, conventional language and homely evocations of the familiar are used to emphasize the horror of the alien. Thus, at the very beginning of *The Trial*, after the two sinister henchmen have informed K. of the prosecution which has been initiated against him, the protagonist calls on his landlady to find her knitting a pair of stockings, a surreally incongruous image in view of what has gone before. Near the end of "The Killers", as Nick Adams leaves Ole Andreson lying on his bed to await his imminent and more-or-less inevitable execution by the two hired men, the landlady informs the narrator: "He's been in his room all day...I guess he don't feel well. I said to him: 'Mr Andreson, you ought to go out and take a walk on a nice fall day like this,' but he didn't feel like it".⁹ The touching tone of innocent concern in the landlady's voice emphasizes all the more the utter solitude of Andreson's lot. It is a tone of naiveté we also find in Meg - consider her speculations on Stanley's relationship to the two villains: "Do you think they know each other? I think they're

⁷Randall Stevenson's interesting essay "Harold Pinter - Innovator?" (found in Alan Bold, *Harold Pinter - You Never Heard Such Silence* [London: Vision Press, 1984] pp29) devotes some attention to Kafka and Hemingway - another promising study should be Robert Armstrong's *Kafka and Pinter: Shadowboxing* (London: Macmillan, 1998 [unpublished at time of writing]).

⁸ in Graham Greene's story "Across the Bridge" from *Collected Stories* (London: Bodley Head, 1972) p432

⁹ Ernest Hemingway, *Men Without Women* (Cleveland: World Pub., 1946) p76

old friends. Stanley had a lot of friends".¹⁰ Or the way in which, as they keep Stanley in the upstairs bedroom, interrogating and probably torturing him, Meg brings them a cup of tea.

Cordiality, kindness and generosity are not, however, simply confined to the landladies in these texts. All three authors have their agents of execution display moments of 'humanity' and understanding, moments which communicate either a sadism, a sense of the macabre, a disconcerting irony or (worst of all) a puzzling sincerity. Throughout the long course of his *Prozeß*, K. encounters one sympathetic figure after another within the nameless web of state machinery which eventually engineers his execution - the guardian (*Wachter*) who comes to arrest him and then offers to bring him breakfast, the court-usher (*Gerichtsdienner*) who gives K. a guided tour of the law chambers, the reassuring voice of the girl in the information bureau who offers K. a chair ("Is this your first time here? Now, now, that's nothing to worry about...").¹¹ If the two killers in Hemingway's story employ a similar vocabulary of casual, relaxed informality, it is with precisely the opposite intention - that of instilling fear and trepidation into their audience with calculated malice:

"What do you do here nights?" Al asked.
 "They eat the big dinner," his friend said. "They call come here and eat the big dinner."
 "That's right," George said.
 "So you think that's right?" Al asked George.
 "Sure".
 "You're a bright boy, aren't you?"¹²

This is not quite the same strategy of language as Mick uses in *The Caretaker*, where friendly and hostile registers of language remain separate, surreally juxtaposed to stun the victim - here, Hemingway's killers adopt the form but *not* the content of joking bar-room banter, a veneer of informality which thinly veils a genuine, deep-seated malevolence. The manner of Goldberg and McCann is equally informal, an unsettling blend of homespun truths, fireside wisdom and gentlemanly charm which quite wins Meg over. The disparity between the warm-hearted affections of Goldberg's nostalgic homilies ("How often, in this day and age, do you come across

¹⁰ *The Birthday Party* (London: Methuen, 1960) p68 - all following citations will be from this edition.

¹¹ Franz Kafka, *Der Prozeß* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1960) - own translation, p85

¹² *Men Without Women*, 67

true, real warmth?" 56) and McCann's simplistic brutality ("Wake him up. Stick a needle in his eye." 52) provides the menace implicit in the visitor's presence.

The possibility that the stranger who throws a party for your birthday may actually wish to stick a needle in your eye instigates a hermeneutics of suspicion, a distrust of conventional signs. Like the hospitality of Kafka's clerks or the joking banter of Al and Max, the good-natured generosity of Goldberg and McCann no longer means what it actually signifies. Texts such as "The Killers" and *The Birthday Party* translate the sort of purely philosophical scepticism of language we find in Wittgenstein's notebooks (i.e. how do we know the words "Good morning" always mean "Good morning"?) into a much more conspiratorial cynicism (i.e. what does the person who wishes me "Good morning" really want from me?). Such texts encourage a distrust of the world of signs not through any form of philosophical argument, but by showing how apparently 'good' signs (gestures of kindness, helpfulness, affection) are actually 'bad' ones (intentions to kill, maim, humiliate). In the worlds of such texts, the link between sign and meaning is no longer *a priori* - a smile on a face, a warm handshake, an offer of coffee may actually be expressing the most malicious of intentions. In this way Kafka, Hemingway and Pinter, after their own individual fashion, re-introduce malice into uncertainty.

In a sense, by reading such texts (or seeing them performed), the reader undergoes a kind of 'conversion'. A naive belief in the trustworthiness of the sign is lost when one sees acts of unambiguous cruelty accompanied by words of kindness. When Goldberg hears from Meg that Stanley has been "down in the dumps lately", he remarks: "We'll bring him out of himself" (33). To 'bring someone out of his/her self' would mean, to the unconverted, to cheer somebody up, to raise their spirits. Conventionally, this is what the phrase signifies. Pinter's audience, however, will by now hear the second, more sinister echo: to bring Stanley 'out of himself' will mean to rob Stanley of any sense of self, to un-serve him, as it were. The impulse to consider everything one reads or hears *twice*, not to accept anything in its conventional sense but to constantly suspect it of some meaning outside its habitual usage - such impulses only spring from 'converted' readers, readers who have seen enough to know better than to trust at face value.

So the possibility of malice endows even the most innocent and straightforward aspects of a text with an ambiguity - however, in the case of *The Birthday Party*, it is not an 'undecidable' ambiguity, in contrast to the other two Pinter plays we have studied. Where one might well ask "Is Ruth *really* serious or is she only playing?" or "Is Aston's altruism *really* genuine or is it just a trick?", one certainly never feels like asking: "Is Goldberg *really* a warm person?". The uncertainty of *The Birthday Party* - like that of *The Trial* and "The Killers" - is a purely theocentric one: it is an uncertainty which relies on the *primum mobile* of the story's development remaining ineffable. All we ever see are the effects of this 'ineffability' - strangers appearing in lunchrooms, apartments, seaside bedsits. We never find out what Old Andreson has done in Chicago, why K. is being prosecuted, or indeed precisely what Goldberg and McCann's "organisation" actually is. This withdrawal of key information - as opposed to providing a choice between two conflicting sets of alternative data - supplies the uncertainty of *The Birthday Party* and thereby imitates a theological structure: a nameless, off-stage "organisation" which punishes and rewards for no reason. With this in mind, we shall now examine *The Birthday Party* in exclusively Neoplatonic terms, to see how closely (and perversely) the 'unselving' and reduction of Stanley parallels the re-incorporation of the soul into the Ineffable One of Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius ...and Meister Eckhart.

4.2.3 Absorbed into the One.

Before re-interpreting the text of *The Birthday Party* in terms of Eckhart's Neoplatonism, three caveats have to be made. Firstly, the ground for such a reading is one of simple hermeneutical curiosity - no-one is suggesting for a moment that Pinter wrote his play with anything even remotely concerning the word 'Neoplatonism' in mind. Insofar as the play concerns the destruction of a self, the text offers some parallels with the gradual dissolution of the self in Neoplatonic thought, and it is these parallels which we aim to investigate. Secondly, the fact that Eckhart's vocabulary has Neoplatonic roots does not necessarily make Eckhart a Neoplatonist, but rather someone who works within a certain tradition to develop it in a highly

original and distinctive way. The Neoplatonic citations of Eckhart we use are not intended to be representative of the Eckhart presented in this study.

The possibility that, particularly concerning topics such as the genealogy of the word *Volksgeist* back to Herder and beyond, or the various and manifold connections between Nazism and mysticism, some of the Ur-metaphors of National Socialism might have found their beginnings in the flourishing of late medieval Rhineland mysticism would seem to be a bizarre speculation. Admittedly, there are a number of common motifs: the union of the self with an ineffable, omnipotent and above all *pure* Oneness, the sacrifice of individuality in order to be assimilated into a mysterious entity, bigger and Other than oneself ... whether National Socialism does provide an example of how a totalitarian state can exploit a number of long-abiding religious metaphors for their own political ends remains a question for another time. The fact that some Nazi intellectuals were greatly interested in Eckhart (most notably Alfred Rosenberg, whose 1934 work *Die Religion des Meister Eckharts* extolled the new, Nordic faith of the Dominican above the “tormented, bound, bastardized ‘half-African’ Augustine”) may or may not provide some substance to these speculations - however, such conjectures upon the political implications of Eckhart’s *Gottesmystik* will need to be developed elsewhere. The totalitarian possibilities of Eckhart’s dissolving of the soul into the darkness of the Godhead, although interesting and indirectly related, have no real place in a study of Pinter, and therefore I have chosen to pass over them for now.¹³

The various motifs of Neoplatonism occur frequently in the writings of Dionysius and Eckhart: the progressive return of the fallen soul to the One, a return from multiplicity to unicity, from the impure to the pure, from sense to non-sense, and from discourse and vision to silence and darkness. In order for the soul to be reunited with the original oneness or *epekeina tes ousia*, it first has to undergo a series of progressive stages - what Eckhart calls “process of becoming nothingness” (*in*

¹³ cited p275 - for Rosenberg’s understanding of Eckhart in his *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1938) see section 1.1. A number of Rosenberg studies do deal with his obsession with Eckhart at some length, most notably Robert Cecil’s *The Myth of the Master Race* (London: Batsford, 1972). Cecil points out how Rosenberg understood the inimitably Eckhartian ground of the soul in purely racial terms, “a secret core that there develops what we call racial characteristic (*Volkstum*) and race-culture...” p85 - Cecil is citing Rosenberg from an address made to a conference of teachers.

einem niht-werdenne).¹⁴ This section will now examine how Stanley himself becomes a “nothingness” - the five stages he has to undergo before being assimilated back into the “organisation”: the recognition of one’s sinful individuality, the breaking-down of reason, blindness, silence and, finally, the ecstasy.

Individuality Is Wrong

It is clear from the beginning that Stanley is, in the ironic sense of the word, an individual. His lethargic and seemingly aimless lifestyle, his aversion to fresh air, his propensity to fictionalise his past, his unkempt state and erratic mood-swings (joking with Meg one moment, deep fits of depression the next) all mark him immediately as someone distinct from Petey and Lulu - someone who neither participates in society nor contributes to it. Lulu’s reproof in Act I essentially sums up his ex-centricity regarding the outside world:

Do you want to have a look at your face?...You could do with a shave, do you know that?... Don’t you ever get out?...I mean, what do you do, just sit around the house like this all day long?...Hasn’t Mrs Boles got enough to do without have you under her feet all day long? (25)

Lulu’s good-natured criticism of Stanley, painting his existence as a superfluous and unnecessary addition to society, forms a milder version of Goldberg and McCann’s own diatribe against him, later in the play. Stanley’s individuality is unclean (“When did you last have a bath?” demands Goldberg), unproductive (“When did you last wash a cup?” 49), anti-social (“Why do you treat that young lady like a leper?” 47) and ultimately an obstruction to the progress of the community (“Why are you getting in everybody’s way?” 47). Just as the dissimilarity of the imperfect soul prevents its union with the One, Stanley’s distinctive particularity prevents him from participating in any kind of group or communal set of values. Unlike Goldberg, who is full of talk of his “old mum”, his girlfriend, his wife, his “Uncle Barney”, Stanley never talks about his family context, apart from mentioning the father who failed to attend his concert performance.

¹⁴ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p46 - from the *Talks of Instruction*, XXIII, Traktat 2, Largier p422

Clearly, if Stanley is to be ushered back into whatever concept of society Goldberg has in mind, the annihilation of Stanley resistant selfhood is the first task to be undertaken. Eckhart calls this “the destruction of the person”, an “eradication and reduction of self” (*ein vernichten und verkleinern sin selbes*).¹⁵ Stanley’s reintroduction into the “*organisation*” (italics mine) involves precisely this removal of all things alien to it, a process which begins not only with the recognition of difference as obstruction, but also with the abandonment of reason.

The Breaking-Down of Reason.

The disintegration of Stanley’s rational faculties forms the second stage of his progress towards the One and mirrors Eckhart’s own insistence on how the soul “should become non-mental and stripped of its mental nature” (*Da dinsel sol nich geistig sin und entplözet aller geistekteite*).¹⁶ Stanley’s obstinate reluctance to sit down in the middle of Act II eventually instigates the famous interrogation scene - where Goldberg and McCann ply a seated Stanley with a flood of bizarre, disconnected questions (“What about the Albigenist heresy? Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?...Why did the chicken cross the road?” 51). How does such an interrogation effect the disintegration of Stanley’s reason?

In two ways: by showing - through a succession of contradictory and stunningly surreal questions - how all answers are constructs and, consequently, by demonstrating how no answer Stanley provides, rational or irrational, can ever be the ‘right’ one. Goldberg and McCann construct their own truth-conditions in their use of questions - a set of criteria which are utterly their own and which they constantly change. When they ask “Is the number 846 possible or necessary?” (50), there is no correct answer - first it is “necessary but not possible”, then “necessarily possible”, and finally “only necessarily necessary”. The interrogators’ own use of rationality underlines the arbitrary absurdity of their questions; such an abandonment of reason on behalf of the interrogators makes Stanley’s situation quite hopeless. Regardless of whether he gives reasonable answers (“When did you come to this place?” “Last

¹⁵ *ibid*, p46, Largier 420

year.” 48) or nonsensical ones (“Why did you change your name?” “I forgot the other one.” 50), Stanley is wrong, wrong, wrong, “all along the line” (51).

The interrogation scene in Act II shows that Stanley is never going to find the ‘right’ answer through reason, particularly when the interrogators themselves have excluded the rational from their consideration of possible answers. Goldberg and McCann have the monopoly on truth - principally because they make it up as they go along. “Where was your wife?”-“What wife?”-“He’s killed his wife!” (49). Rationality cannot help Stanley but only hinder him in his attempt to satisfy his interrogators’ demands. Like his individuality, Stanley’s reason becomes yet another obstacle to be overcome in his progress towards the One, a One which is beyond identity and difference, true and false, right and wrong.

Blindness

Not only does Stanley lose his reason, he also loses his sight. In the middle of Act II, halfway through the interrogation scene, McCann plucks Stanley’s spectacles away on Goldberg’s orders. “What can you see without your glasses?” asks Goldberg. “Anything” lies the myopic Stanley (49). In Eckhart, such a loss of vision is extolled as a prerequisite for divine knowledge: “When the mind is blind and sees nothing else, it sees God”.¹⁷ In so far as vision is still one of the senses - and thereby maintains the attachment of the soul to the here and now, to this and that - it must be abandoned if one is to embrace the all-encompassing oneness of God, who is neither here nor there, neither this nor that. To lose one’s vision, for both Stanley and the Eckhartian *sêle*, is to lose the final point of contact with the individual, the particular. Such blindness is a prelude towards union with the One.

Of course, the more immediately practical reason why McCann snatches away Stanley’s glasses is to render him defenceless. The stage-directions have Stanley “stumbling” after McCann to recover his spectacles, and then clutching at a chair to steady himself in his short-sightedness(49). Not long after McCann gives Stanley’s glasses back to him, Stanley finds his sight removed again as he plays his turn in

¹⁶ *ibid*, p238 - from the sermon *Renovamini spiritu*, Sermon 83, Largier 194

'blind man's buff'. It is not difficult to see why the loss of vision forms such a central metaphor in Stanley's subjugation, sight being the most irrepressible expression of selfhood. To gaze is to reify, to re-describe, to colour the subject with one's own inimitable viewpoint. The implicit threat in the gaze of the Other - the Other which sees *me* and, in a sense, gives me being - is reciprocal. Were it not for my gaze, the Other would not be. Where Levinas uses this mutual need of the Other positively as the basis for his own post-metaphysical ethic, the foundation of my identity in the gaze of the Other only ever finds malevolent expression in Pinter, regardless of whether it is the reifying gaze of Goldberg, Ruth or Mick. When Stanley loses his sight, his is not merely a physical disadvantage, a handicap which will make Stanley easier to capture and subdue. Stanley's blindness turns him into the subject of those who would perceive him without being perceived. No longer able to individuate and re-appropriate the blur of phenomena which surrounds him, his last weapon of defense - that of the gaze which could glare back triumphantly at his persecutors and consume them from the angle of its own, unreachable perspective - is "stripped away". The loss of Stanley's individual (and individuating) field of vision prepares him to be absorbed back into the One.

Silence

Silence, in Neoplatonism, performs two functions; in one sense, it is a preparatory precondition for being re-appropriated into the One ("Where this word is to be heard, there must be stillness and silence").¹⁸ In another, it is the only adequate response to the ineffability of the One ("The finest thing we can say about God is to be silent...").¹⁹ Stanley's gurgled inarticulation and subsequent silence at the end of the play parodies, in many ways, the unspeakability of the One and the mystical silence which it demands:

GOLDBERG: What do you think? Eh, boy?
 STANLEY *begins to clench and unclench his eyes.*
 McCANN: What's your opinion, sir? Of this prospect, sir?

¹⁷ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p126 - from the sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra*

¹⁸ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p220

¹⁹ *ibid*, p236

GOLDBERG: Prospect. Sure. Sure it's a prospect.

STANLEY's hands clutching his glasses begin to tremble.

What's your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?

STANLEY concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.

STANLEY: Uh-gug...uh-gug...eeeh-gag...(on the breath) Caahh...caahh...(84)

Rather than re-iterate the obvious political significance of Stanley's loss of speech, an area of *The Birthday Party* already well-explored and documented by other Pinter critics, I would just like to underline how silence acts as a closing stage of Stanley's journey towards the One - the One being, in this sense, his re-incorporation into society. The importance of remaining alert - of retaining the use of all of one's senses - has been an important motif throughout the play. When Stanley suggests that his interrogators are deaf to his requests for them to leave, Goldberg becomes wistfully ironic: "What makes you think that? As a matter of fact, every single one of my senses is at its peak." (44) - an assertion we will not be able to make about Stanley at the end of the play. Stanley's protective feelings towards Meg and Petey ("They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't." 45) underline the link between resistance and the individual's use of the senses. Whether Stanley actually loses his own sense of smell in the end, as he is led out to the van, is impossible to say. What he certainly does lose is his sight and his speech. As Stanley moves towards the One, his reason, vision and speech are gradually stripped away from him.

The noises Stanley makes as he attempts to speak ("Caahh...caahh...") are reminiscent of the moment in *Godot*, when the much-oppressed Pozzo tries to speak without his hat. Typically interpreted as the impossibility/futility of intellectual expression, Stanley's stammering and then ultimate silence also signify the 'wiping clean' of Stanley's slate, a *tabula rasa* with which Goldberg proposes to make "a new man" (81). The Eckhartian soul, we will recall, is "empty of self and freed from the knowledge of objects"²⁰, emptied to prepare a space (a clearing) for the birth of the Word in the ground of the soul. *The Birthday Party* is the story of one such birth - the story of the "emptying" of a human being (or as Ruby Cohn would say, the "annihilation of an individual") and the birth of a new citizen. If speech really is the

²⁰ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p225, from the sermon *Cum factus esset*

ex-expression of interiority, then Stanley's complete emptiness of self explains his silence - Stanley has, quite literally, 'nothing' to say.

Ecstasy

Ecstasy, in Neoplatonic terms, is the joy of the final union with the One, the bliss of abandoning one's own corrupting selfhood. The fact that, etymologically, it literally means a 'standing outside one's self' (ex-stasis) brings us closer to the version of ecstasy we find in *The Birthday Party* - as encapsulated, we will recall, by Goldberg's sinister promise about Stanley to Meg: "We'll bring him out of himself" (33). Goldberg, for all his irony, is ruthlessly accurate: in three acts, we witness the gradual dissolution of Stanley's individuality, the dismantling of his reason, the theft of his vision and speech, and the 'hollowing-out' of his person - presumably to be filled by the likes of Monty, Goldberg's sinister-sounding doctor who is going to give Stanley "special treatment". The final moments of the play do intimate, in a sense, how Stanley really has gone out of himself:

MEG: Where's Stan?

Pause.

Is Stan down yet, Petey?

PETEY: No...he's...

MEG: Is he still in bed?

PETEY: Yes, he's...still asleep. (86)

When the mute, well-dressed, clean-cut version of Stanley is finally marched out of his house towards the van (a march, one may add, not at all like Josef K.'s final walk with his interrogators, where K. struggles and pulls and locks his legs the entire way), Stanley's old self remains behind in the bedsit, still "asleep". As the silent, characterless, "new" Stanley is escorted out to the van and driven away to an uncertain future, Stanley's ghost almost seems to haunt the house in the closing minutes of the play, thanks to Petey's deceit and Meg's ignorance.

Of course, Stanley's ecstasy in *The Birthday Party* is by no means joyful or even desired. Whereas the Neoplatonic soul longs to return to the source, is willing to give everything up in order to be re-joined with the originary Oneness, Stanley is trapped, bullied and coerced into his abandonment of self. It would be difficult

indeed to imagine a reading of *The Birthday Party* where Stanley runs - like Kafka's mouse - willingly into the trap he sees before him. Although a Christian Neoplatonist would see Stanley's clinging to his own individuality as 'impure' and 'sinful', it remains a forgivably secular gesture. Stanley does not trust the One which seeks to re-claim him, despite all its promises that he'll be a "mensch" and will have "success" (83). In the face of an all-encompassing homogeneity, Stanley adopts a faintly Kierkegaardian pose, preferring the Individual to the General, the particular over the universal, and seeking refuge from the various Goldbergs and McCanns of this world in his own irreducible inwardness - an inwardness which, alas, proves all too reducible.

4.2.4 The Menace of the Mystery: Welcoming as Violence

In the middle of his sermon *Dum medium silentium*, Eckhart quotes the biblical verse which supplies the title of the address:

In the middle of the night, when all things were in a quiet silence, there was spoken to me a hidden word. It came like a thief by stealth.²¹

In contrast to Kafka's childhood trauma and Pinter's henchmen, the advent of the Other in the middle of the night finds no menacing overtones in Eckhart - it is an opportunity for spiritual renewal. For the Dominican, the divine Other arrives in the night to *give*, not to take; to bestow, not to abduct. Despite such ominous-sounding phrases such as "the darkness of the mystery of the eternal Godhead", Eckhart's apophatic discourse of ineffable alterity remains an alterity of love - hence the ultimately positive version of a giving Other in his theology, an Other whose *Gift* will never be poisonous, malicious or ambiguous.

All of which, in turn, does provoke a cluster of complex questions: when did we begin to see the henological model of the One as that which might seek to do us harm, not good? Precisely when, and how, did the giving, caring Mystery acquire an unconditional, unmotivated malice? What manner of genealogy could chart the

²¹ M. O'C. Walshe(ed), *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises* (London: Watkins, 1979) vol 1, p9 - Sapientia 18:4

transformation of the ineffable from *agape* to groundless malevolence? And, finally: to what extent can we see the darker strains of the tradition of the absurd - Josef K.'s never-cited crime, Goldberg and McCann's unexplained "organisation" - as constituting a sinister version of the language of negative theology, with its emphasis on the utter ineffability of God, the unsearchability of his judgements and the absolutely unconditional and unmotivated nature of his love?

These are questions which cannot be answered within the bounds of this study; and yet which nevertheless pervade our entire approach to the question of the Other in Eckhart, Derrida and Pinter. For now, we simply have to conclude that our Neoplatonic reading of *The Birthday Party* offers us an insight into why uncertainty is so sinister in Pinter. Insofar as Stanley's story in *The Birthday Party* is the story of a man who is crushed by the Ineffable, by people we do not know, for reasons we are not told about, and is taken away to a place which is never revealed. Such uncertainty in the form of mystery, as we have already said, is of a radically different kind from the undecidability to be found in *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, nevertheless the effects are the same, even if the sources are different: exploitation, suffering, fear and anguish. Whereas, in Eckhart and Derrida, the uncertain is affirmed in order to bring about an 'openness' or 'emptiness' towards the Other, no such positive employment of uncertainty occurs in Pinter. Regardless of whether it is Ruth playing games with a puzzled Lenny, two brothers playing 'good cop/bad cop' with a homeless tramp, or an interrogation in which the only questions asked are always unanswerable, the affirmation of the uncertain in Pinter is always exploitative, always malicious.

Chapter Five: Uncertainty and the Secret

5.1 Negative Theology vs Deconstruction: Eckhart as De-limiter or Deferrer ?

God is not perhaps so much a region beyond knowledge, as something prior to the sentences we speak.

- Foucault, *The Order of Things*¹

Our examination of uncertainty in Eckhart, Derrida and Pinter, along with its subsequent affirmation /defamation, has almost come to an end. In preceding chapters we have seen how the critique of presence renders God/the text resistant to all totalization - an inescapable ineffability/textual instability which, although affirmed as dynamic and life-giving in both negative theology and deconstruction, only ever finds its expression in *The Homecoming* through aggressive mind-games and strategic exploitation. We have seen how the motif of wandering, with all its implications of goal-lessness and whylessness, is not only depicted but also extolled in Eckhart and Derrida, and portrayed as a state of vulnerability and anguish in *The Caretaker*. Finally, we have examined the uncertainty of the Mystery /Other in Eckhart and Derrida, an Other which *gives* and to whom we should remain empty/open, alongside the sinister version of the Other in *The Birthday Party*, an Other which uses its ineffability to crush and assimilate any difference it finds in its path.

What remains, however, is the question of the secret - of that which is withheld, concealed, kept away. The aim of this final, brief chapter is to ask: to what extent do the texts of Derrida, Eckhart and Pinter conceal a secret? Is Eckhart's Godhead beyond God really just another all-too-familiar deferral of the mystery? Can *différance* ever really be "neither a word or a concept"?² Is there already a secret to Pinter's plays, locked away somewhere inside them - or do *we* bring the mystery to his texts? Do we imbue the noises we hear, the words we read, with an enigma which is simply not there?

¹ cit. by Jean-Luc Marion in "A Relief for Theology", *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1994) p570

² *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) p3

As we have seen consistently throughout this thesis, Derrida sees Meister Eckhart and the discourse of negative theology, even in its most apophatic of moments, as the keeper of a secret. In fairness to Derrida, his insistence upon the subtle yet inherent logocentrism in Eckhart and Dionysius has not been dogmatic, a blind sticking-to-one's-guns.³ In essays devoted exclusively to the apophatic project such as "Denials" (1987) and "Post-Scriptum" (1993), Derrida takes great pains to point out his admiration for the corpus of negative theology - a "corpus at once open and closed", and written in a language "that does not cease testing the very limits of language" (*qui ne cesse de mettre à l'épreuve les limites même du langage*).⁴ Aware of claims that he is subscribing (as Kevin Hart has said) to an orthodox, "classic" version of negative theology - a version which would simply be the negative half of a Hegelian dialectic - Derrida has been keen to distance himself from a naive reading of Eckhart and Dionysius, and acknowledge the complexity and difficulty of their thought.

An acknowledgement, however, which has not led Derrida to withdraw his basic - and long-abiding - objection to negative theology: that, after all its negations, de-negations and auto-deconstructions, the apophatic is still concerned with (to use Foucault's phrase) a region beyond knowledge. It still keeps "in reserve ...some hyperessentiality" (*elle semble réserver ...quelque suressentialité*) and thereby ultimately re-affirms the onto-theo-logic.⁵ What I propose to do in this section is, first of all, to examine the various ways in which Derrida has strengthened and elaborated his position on negative theology - in particular on Meister Eckhart; and, secondly, to show how the version of Eckhart Derrida rejects as logocentric, although by no means a simplistic, 'classical' model of the negative theologian, remains nevertheless a selective reading of his work, based on a certain number of the more

³ For a different and somewhat hostile version of Derrida's reluctance to acknowledge the openness and non-logocentricity of negative theology, see Morny Joy's "Divine Reservations" (*Derrida and Negative Theology* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1992] pp255-283), which paints an amusingly original but slightly bizarre picture of a solitary, prodigal sceptic, unwilling to return once more to the home of his Jewish heritage: "Derrida remains on the threshold. He cannot come home - though it seems he is enticed, fascinated. Derrida is the exile, the outsider...Lashed to the masthead of reason, he will not succumb to the siren song of experience."p263

⁴ "Post-Scriptum" found in Coward, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p295,299, *Sauf le nom* 53

⁵ "Denials" found in Coward, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p77, *Psyché* 540

orthodox, 'safer' moments in his sermons, as opposed to other passages which would be less easily appropriated into a metaphysics of presence.

In the original discussion following Derrida's 1971 lecture "La Différance", Brice Parain was one of the first to stand up and declare: "[Différance] is the source of everything and one cannot know it. It is the God of negative theology".⁶ Derrida's passionate response, both interrupting and interrupted, does tell us something about the depth of his conviction: "It is and is not - it is above all not - ...". Why does Derrida refuse to except figures such as Eckhart and Dionysius from his critique of the logocentric tradition? Why, for Derrida, will deconstruction always remain analogous to negative theology, but always maintain an "infinite distance" from it?⁷

Derrida's objections to the apophatic discourse, fleshed out in his two later essays, are four in number: firstly (and most importantly), the discourse of negative theology manifests itself in the form of a promise - the promise to impart a secret, to unveil a mystery, a promise which defers as much as it refers. Secondly, the frequent insistence in negative theology on the necessity of purity - one must be pure in order to receive the secret, in order to be worthy of the promise - also arouses Derrida's suspicions of a self-present identity. Thirdly, such discourses are always *directed* - Derrida notes how both Dionysius and Eckhart begin and end their writings with prayers, as though to 'orient' the address towards its correct destination, and not just 'anywhere'. Such an insistence on purity and preparation, says Derrida (fourthly) ultimately provokes a prohibition of all discourse, a theology which exhorts silence and commands not to speak. For Derrida, all four of these motifs in negative theology - the promise of the secret, the guiding prayer, the purity of the reception and the silencing ineffable - are characteristic of logocentric discourses.

⁶Taken from "The original discussion of 'La Différance'" in David Wood, *Derrida and Différance* (Coventry: Parousia Press, 1988) p84. Stephen Moore, citing Parain's remark in his *Poststructuralism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), adds somewhat flippantly: "Perhaps he had wandered in late or, more likely, fallen asleep. Several pages into his paper, Derrida had already said of différance..." (p23). If an author's disclaimer is enough to dissuade Moore from thinking one thing about the author's text instead of another, then perhaps his own rational faculties have fallen asleep.

⁷ in Wood, *Derrida and Différance*, p84

1. The Promise of the Secret

To begin with the secret. In Eckhart's writings, writes Derrida, "one may say that no mystery is made of the necessity of the secret", a fact which implies finding "the *place* proper to the experience of the secret" (*le lieu propre à l'expérience du secret*).⁸ There can be no denying that, in certain passages, Eckhart does indeed speak of the Godhead in terms of a secret - or as Derrida would say, a hyperessentiality kept forever in reserve. "God is a word: an unspoken word" (*Got ist ein wort, ein ungesprochenen wort*) says Eckhart in *Misit dominus manum suam*.⁹ The word 'secret/mystery' (*Geheimnis/heimlichkeit*) occurs again in sermons such as *Homo quidam nobilis* - "the hidden secrets of His hidden deity", "the mystery of the eternal Godhead"¹⁰, which would seem to confirm Eckhart as the keeper of a secret. All of the excerpts from Eckhart which Derrida cites - and Derrida makes use of two sermons in particular in "Denials", *Quasi stella matutina* and *Renovamini spiritu* - are selected with this notion of a reserve hyperessentiality in mind:

But when I said that God is not a being and is above Being [*über wesen*], I have not denied Him being [*ich im niht wesen abgesprochen*] but, rather, I have exalted Being in Him [*ich han es in im gehoehet*]. p78

Goodness is a garment under which God is hidden, and the will apprehends God under the garment of goodness. p115

When we apprehend God in Being, we apprehend Him in his *parvis* [the outer sanctuary of the temple], for Being is the *parvis* in which He resides. p121

"Is it arbitrary to still call truth or hyper-truth this unveiling which is perhaps no longer an unveiling of Being?" asks Derrida. "I do not believe so".¹¹ The selections from Eckhart that Derrida quotes all reflect this notion of a hidden "hyper-truth" (*sur-verté*). Whether the metaphor is the nakedness of God which lies under the garment, or the *penetralium* which lies in the inner sanctuary of the temple, Derrida is keen to stress the moments in Eckhart where a hidden, greater truth is concealed beneath the

⁸ "Denials", p89, *Psyché* 552

⁹ Davies (ed), *Selected Writings*, p128 - from Sermon 53, Largier 564

¹⁰ Clarke, *Meister Eckhart*, p216-7

¹¹ "Denials", p114, *Psyché* 577

visible. Hence the faintly Freudian irony of the essay title in English: "Denials". Negative theology vigorously denies what is secretly true.¹² No surprise, therefore, that Derrida sees Eckhart's denial of onto-theology as an ultimate affirmation.

Thus, Derrida presents a version of Eckhart, who on the one hand "radically contests the tradition from which [he] seems to come" (*conteste radicalement la tradition dont il semble provenir*), but on the other, whose "hyperbole" still remains "faithful to the originary onto-theological injunction" (*fidèle...à l'injonction onto-théologique originaire*).¹³ Although the word 'dialectic' does not appear, it is a remark which reinforces Kevin Hart's assertion that, to a certain extent, Derrida's understanding of Eckhart is still coloured by Hegel. This does not mean that Derrida's version of Eckhart is invalid - but simply that there is still *another* Eckhart, one who can be constructed by citing different passages from the ones Derrida presents to us in "Denials".

For example, Derrida has never cited or alluded to Eckhart's celebrated prayer: "I ask God to free me of 'God'" (*Her umbe sô bite ich got, daz er mich ledic mache gotes*).¹⁴ A prayer in which Eckhart's attempt to de-limit 'God' - that is, to free God from 'God' - is most clearly expressed. Eckhart attempts to free God from 'God' in the same way Derrida wishes to free the text from the book. And yet it is a *de-limitation* which Derrida can only ever see as a *deferral*, a negation "in the name of a way of truth".¹⁵ Wherever Eckhart de-limits, Derrida will always suspect him of deferring. Whenever Eckhart claims to abandon onto-theology, Derrida will always suspect him of really 'saving it for later'. It is precisely this conviction of Derrida's - that Dominicans can defer but they can't de-limit, a conviction based on a selective reading of Eckhart's works - which we are calling into question.

Consider again, for another example, a key passage from the sermon *Nolite timere eos*, a passage Derrida has never cited. *Nolite timere* is a sermon Derrida is fond of quoting - he cites a line from it in his essay on Jabès (the first line of the

¹² I say "faintly", for Derrida stresses his wish to understand the notion of denial "prior even to its elaboration in the Freudian context" ("Denials", p95).

¹³ "Post-Scriptum" found in Coward, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p309, 78-9

¹⁴ Davies (ed), *Selected Writings*, p207 Sermon 52 - *Beati pauperes spiritu* found in Quint 2:502

¹⁵ "Post-Scriptum", p310

passage below¹⁶), and again in his essay on Levinas.¹⁷ Derrida has never mentioned, however, the final and most important passage in this short, three-side sermon:

God 'becomes' God when all creatures speak God forth: there 'God' is born. When I was still in the ground, in the depths, in the flow and source of the Godhead, no one asked me where I wished to go or what I was doing. But as I flowed forth, all creatures uttered 'God'...This is how all creatures speak of God. And why do they not speak of the Godhead? All that is in the Godhead is One, and of this no-one can speak. God acts, while the Godhead does not act. There is nothing for it to do, there is no action in it...The difference between God and the Godhead is that one acts, the other does not. If I return to 'God' but do not remain there, then my break through is far better than my flowing out...But when I enter the ground, the bottom, the flow and the source of the Godhead, no-one asks me where I come from and where I have been. There no-one has missed me, and there God 'unbecomes'.¹⁸

God 'becomes' and 'unbecomes': by insisting on the nameless, silent non-place beyond and before 'God', Eckhart de-ontologises God by robbing Him of what Aquinas would have called 'His highest name' - Being (*esse*). Aquinas' *via eminentiae*, we will recall, insisted that names could be used of God, but in an imperfect manner.¹⁹ God is denied the names 'Being', 'Love', 'Goodness', only to re-possess them on a higher level, in an infinitely ungraspable way - it is precisely this idea of a Thomist hyperessentiality that Derrida wishes to attribute to Eckhart. Whilst there are many passages in both the German and Latin works where Eckhart would seem to agree with his Dominican brother, the above-cited passage is not one of them. The Godhead beyond God is the non-place where names and attributes are not re-affirmed but *dissolved*. Concepts of God are not re-formulated but *dismantled*. It is difficult to see how any kind of Hegelian *relève* could breakthrough to the truthless, nameless abyss of the Godhead - or indeed, what manner of 'hyperessentiality' it could ever expect to find there.

For another example of a sermon which Derrida never mentions, and yet which would undermine the re-assuring, re-affirming version of Eckhart proposed in "Denials", one could look at *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra*. It is a sermon, in many ways, about nothingness, about the divine nothingness that God is and the creaturely

¹⁶ *Writing and Difference*, p71

¹⁷ *Writing and Difference*, p146

¹⁸ Davies (ed), *Meister Eckhart*, p234

nothingness that created things are. The subject is the moment after the blinding conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus, taken from Acts 9:8 “Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes saw nothing”. Eckhart’s sermon deals with this word “nothing” (*nihil*) in a variety of ways, revealing at once an extraordinary multiplicity of meanings:

It seems to me that this little phrase has a fourfold meaning. First, when he rose up from the ground, with open eyes he saw nothing, and this nothingness was God. Indeed he saw God, and that is what he calls a nothingness. Second, when he rose up, he saw nothing but God. Third, in all things, he saw nothing but God. Fourth, when he saw God, he saw all things as a nothingness.

*Mich dünket, daz diz wörtelîn vier sinne habe. Ein sin ist: do er ûfstuont von der erden, mit offenen ougen sach er niht, und daz niht was got; wan do er got sach, daz heizet er ein niht. Der ander sin: dô er ûfstuont, dô ensach er niht wan got. Der dritte: in allen dingen ensach er niht wan got. Der vierde: dô er got sach, dô sach er alliu dinc als ein niht.*²⁰

Here, Eckhart makes use of the two kinds of nothingness in his thought - the inimitable, unspeakable no-thingness of God, and the creaturely nothingness of created beings whose entire existence depends on God. In the second chapter (Section 2.1.2), we suggested briefly that Eckhart’s understanding of God as a “nothingness” (*ein niht*) concerned a God which is like no-thing. God’s radical incommensurability, the fact that there is literally (following Avicenna’s dictum) no-thing which can be similar to God, prompts Eckhart to call Him a *niht*. Might not this *niht* still be a Derridean “hyperessentiality” - or, more accurately, a ‘hypernullity’? Whatever we think or say or write about God, the secret of what He ‘is’ will always be different, will always be other. Is this not a classic example of the deferred “hyper-truth”? A second passage from the same sermon shows us why this might not be so:

To see [God] one must be blind and one must divest God of everything that there is. A master says: to speak of God in any simile is to speak of him in an impure mode. But whoever speaks of God through nothingness speaks of him to the point.

When the mind penetrates into the One, entering in pure dereliction [verworfenheit] of itself, it finds God as in a nothingness. A man had a dream, a daydream: it seemed to him that he was big with nothingness as a woman is with child. In this nothingness, God was born. He was the fruit of nothingness. God

¹⁹ for a summary of this, see Bernard McGinn’s excellent introduction “Meister Eckhart on Speaking About God” in his *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986) vol 2, pp15-30

²⁰ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p122 - Sermon 71, Quint 3:211-2

was born in nothingness. This is why it says: "Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes saw nothing".

...swer daz sehen sol, der muoz blind sîn und muoz got al abnemen von ihte. Ein meister sprichet: swer von gote redet bî deheiner glîchnisse, der redet unlûterliche von im. Der aber bî nihte von gote redet, der redet eigenliche von im.

Swenne diu sêle kumet in ein und si dâ inne tritet in ein lûter verworfenheit ir selber, dâ vindet si got als in einem nihte. Ez dûhte einen menschen als in eine troume - ez was ein wachender troum -, wie ez swanger wûrde von nihte als ein vrouwe mit einem kinde, und in dem nihte wart got geborn; dër was diu vruht des nihtes. Got wart geborn in dem nihte. Dâ von sprichet er: "er stuont ûf von der erden, und mit offenen ougen sach er niht." ²¹

We shall return to what Eckhart means by "impure mode" in a moment. When Derrida insisted that *différance* was unnameable, but "*not* because our language has not yet found or received this name"²², he was distinguishing *différance* not just from Heidegger's Being but also from the God of negative theology. *Différance*, Derrida has famously said, is older than both Being and God. Despite Eckhart's frequent declaration that God is nameless (*namloz*), Derrida still suspects Eckhart's God of ultimately possessing a secret, originary name, a secret identity: "To respond to the true name of God...It is to this end that the negative procedure refuses, denies, rejects all the inadequate attributions" (*...répondre au vrai nom de Dieu...C'est à cette fin que la procédure négative refuse, nie, rejette toutes les attributions inadéquates*).²³ Despite passages such as the one cited, where Eckhart presents a God divested "of everything that there is", a silent, nameless, primordial nothingness which is the source of all names - Derrida still sees in Eckhart the return (*relève*) to a "hyper-truth", one which would re-inscribe the very attributes that had been temporarily 'denied'.

There are eighty-three sermons in Quint's edition of the *Deutsche Werke* - it is obviously not the intent of this section to castigate Derrida for not having quoted from every one of them. Nor is the intention to simply label Derrida's Eckhart 'wrong' or 'incomplete' - on the contrary, many Eckhart scholars would agree with the dialectical reading of Eckhart's *dénégations*.²⁴ The aim of this section is simply

²¹ *ibid*, p126 - Sermon 71, Largier 71

²² *Margins of Philosophy* (trans. Alan Bass - Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) p26, 28

²³ "Post-Scriptum", p310, *Sauf le nom* 82

²⁴ McGinn, admittedly somewhat guardedly, agrees that "the term *dialectic*, at least understood in its Neoplatonic form, is, I believe, a more appropriate word to characterize the dynamics of Eckhart's

to point out how the body of Eckhart's texts, to use Derrida's own words, "definitively escape any exhaustive treatment" (*se dérobent définitivement à toute exhaustion*).²⁵ There is no single Eckhart one can incontestably deduce from the sermons, no more than there is a single negative theology, a fact Derrida himself acknowledges on more than one occasion.²⁶

As soon as Derrida has established his logocentric reading of Eckhart, where the abyss of the Godhead would become the secret location of the hyperessentiality of God, then the rest of his objections - that negative theology is obsessed with purity, that it always calls on prayer to guide its discourses, and that its primary function is not to encourage discourse but to silence it - follow on fairly logically. If one insists on interpreting negative theology not as a de-limitation of God but rather as a deferral of God's secret *ousia*, then such words as 'purity', 'prayer' and 'silence' are going to be understood in their conventional meanings, as opposed to the highly original and unorthodox use which a different reading of Eckhart would make of them.

2. Purity

For example, the notion of 'purity' becomes an ever-recurring motif in "Denials", as Derrida uses it to show how negative theology still conforms to logocentric assumptions of presence. Taking the example of Moses proffered by Dionysius in his *Mystical Theology*, who "was ordered first to purify himself, and then to separate himself from those who were not pure"²⁷ before going up onto the mountain to talk with God, Derrida sees this emphasis on purification as the most important logocentric symptom in negative theology. He cites, to further support his argument, Dionysius' recommendation that the soul should be soft and virginal, like

way of speaking about God." From the introduction to McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, vol 2, p26

²⁵ Peggy Kamuf, *A Derrida Reader* (Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p173, *La Dissemination* 183

²⁶ see in particular "Denials" (p82) where Derrida considers the "voluminous and nebulous multiplicity of potentials to which the single expression 'negative theology' yet remains inadequate".

²⁷ "Denials" p92, taken from Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* 1:1000 (*The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid [London: SPCK, 1987])

wax (*keros*), in order to perfectly receive the imprint of God.²⁸ Derrida's point is clear: for the purity of the divine presence to be experienced, uncontaminated by worldly things, the soul itself must be pure and virginal - what Eckhart would call 'God-coloured' (*gotvar*). An aversion towards the 'impure' which would seem to be the epitome of the very onto-theology it seeks to deconstruct.

However, Derrida actually misreads the word 'purity' here - or, at least, fails to take into account another interpretation of the word, one which would no longer understand purity as conformity with a pure self-presence, but rather as the prelude towards union with a divine nothingness. Without a doubt, Eckhart often insists in his sermons (particularly *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum*) on the necessity of remaining "virginal and free" (*ledic und vrî*) towards God. Only likeness can bring about union, as the Scholastics say, therefore "he who wishes to receive the virginal Jesus must himself be virginal and free".²⁹ However, the notion of purity/virginity here does not mean the reception of a presence, or the conformity of the soul to a *certain* identity, a *certain* colour, a *certain* essence. On the contrary, to be 'pure' in Eckhart means to become a kind of abyss - to be unattached to images, "free and disengaged" from all *logoi*, to be "empty and free as God is empty and free in himself".³⁰ If God is a divine nothingness, then the soul too must become a kind of nothingness if it is to achieve union with Him - such is this notion of purity in Eckhart which Derrida fails to allow for.

One might even say it is a desire for purity which Derrida himself displays in his attempt to disassociate deconstruction from the "locutions, detours and syntax" of negative theology.³¹ In a passage from "Post-Scriptum" which relates how negative theology fulfils "the philosophical or ontotheological promise it seems to break" (*la promesse philosophique ou onto-théologique qu'elle paraît renier*)³², Derrida writes:

Conversely, I trust, no text that is not [negative theology] is somehow *contaminated* with negative theology, and even among those texts that

²⁸ *ibid* p120, taken from the *Divine Names* 2:644 (*The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid [London: SPCK, 1987])

²⁹ Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p4 - from the sermon *Intravit Jesus*

³⁰ Davies (ed), *Meister Eckhart*, p163

³¹ *Margins of Philosophy*, p6

³² "Post-Scriptum" p310, *Sauf le nom* 81

apparently do not have, want or believe they have any relation with theology in general. (*italics mine*)

Inversement, je n'en crois aucun qui ne soit en rien contaminé de théologie négative, et même parmi ceux qui apparemment n'ont, ne veulent ou ne croient avoir aucun rapport avec la théologie en général.

Derrida's point is this: if negative theology insists that one can only know what God is through what He is not, then all discourse - even that which claims not to have "any relation with theology in general" - potentially becomes a statement about God. What is of interest to us here, however, is how the word "contaminated" becomes involved in this potential onto-theological re-appropriation of all discourse. Derrida's reference to "those texts that apparently do not ...want...any relation with theology in general" presumably includes his own writings - writings which attempt to enact a critique of onto-theology, yet nevertheless remain "somewhat contaminated with negative theology". Why "contaminated"? one feels forced to ask. Is this because the 'purity' of the deconstructive project must be maintained? And not be infiltrated (and possibly hijacked) by negative theology?

Such questions, no doubt, lead us onto the familiar and somewhat exhausted issue of the status of deconstruction. The point, however, is not to resurrect once more the contours and conclusions of an already well-documented debate (Gasché/Rorty/Norris et al), but simply to highlight how even Derrida cannot escape a notion of 'purity' and 'contamination'. In his desire to keep an "infinite distance" between his own writings and those of negative theology, he has to preserve the 'purity' of his own discourse, of *différance*, and keep it free from any form of metaphysical 'contamination'. Whenever Derrida is forced to differentiate his own work from the various motifs (and motives) of the apophatic, this notion of 'purity' must inevitably be invoked - even if it concerns a 'purity' bereft of any notion of identity or logos, the very kind of 'purity' Derrida failed to recognise in Eckhart: an unattachment to images, a nameless emptiness, a logos-free abyss.

3. Prayers

In addition to the motif of the secret and the insistence on purity in Eckhart and Dionysius' writings, another proof of a 'hyperessentiality' in negative theology cited by Derrida is the use of prayers. For Derrida, no matter how 'subversive' and 'deconstructive' the writings of negative theology appear to be, they are always *directed*. For all their radical use of language and questioning of the onto-theo-logic, they are still addressed towards a destination, towards a hyperessentiality. To illustrate this, Derrida shows how dependent Dionysius is on the guiding prayer. "It is necessary to start with prayers" he writes in the *Divine Names*.³³ The fact that Dionysius begins his writings with both an opening prayer and an *encomium* (a kind of hymnal celebration - "O holiest of holies") implies a desired reading of the text - in much the same way the preface attempts to announce the pathway and trajectory of the text it precedes.

An experience which must yet guide the apophysis towards excellence, not allow it to say just anything... This experience is that of prayer.

*Une expérience doit encore guider l'apophasis vers l'excellence, ne pas la laisser dire n'importe quoi... Cette expérience est celle de la prière.*³⁴

The *encomium* ("Thou hyperessential and more than divine Trinity"), says Derrida, "qualifies God and *determines* prayer, *determines* the other".³⁵ It directs the prayer, and the text which follows it, towards a certain presence, towards a certain place. In doing so, it not only determines God, but also gives its message a single, incontestable meaning. The opening prayer, together with the *encomium*, ensures that the message of the text does not simply wander off anywhere (like one of Derrida's lost postcards) by addressing it to a predetermined destination. Negative theology, Derrida is keen to remind us, cannot simply "say just anything".³⁶

On behalf of negative theology, there are two ways of responding to this third objection of Derrida's. One is to point out that, in certain moments of *The Mystical*

³³ 3:680, cit in "Denials" p112

³⁴ *ibid*, p110, *Psyché*, 571

³⁵ *ibid*, p111, 572

Theology and *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius declares that we *can* “say just anything” about God. He makes the remarkable assertion that to call God “drunk” and “hangover” is more “suitable” than calling Him ‘good’ or ‘wise’³⁷, for “incongruous dissimilarities” make us more aware of God’s ineffability than equally finite adjectives such as ‘almighty’ and ‘all-knowing’. “Everything ...can be a help to contemplation” insists the Areopagite - although here, admittedly, the sense is not so much ‘Say anything you wish’ but rather ‘Call God anything you want to - it is all equally false’.

The second response would be to make Jean Luc Marion’s point that praying *to* God is not the same as talking *about* God, or saying what God ‘is’. Derrida is well aware of this: “Neither the prayer nor the *encomium* is, of course, an act of constative predication. Both have a performative dimension...” (*Ni la prière ni la louange ne sont certes des actes de prédication constative. Toutes deux ont une dimension performative...* p111, 572).³⁸ Nevertheless, although Derrida is willing to acknowledge the performative status of the prayer, he remains insistent that the Dionysian *encomium* “preserves an irreducible relationship to the attribution”. In other words, Dionysius’ various texts emphasising the unspeakability, namelessness and radical otherness of God are ironically undermined from the start by an opening predication of God. Dionysius’ works on the indescribability of God begins paradoxically with a description of God - an *encomium* which addresses God as “trinity” and “hyperessential”.

Do such prayers exist in Eckhart? And do they have the same ‘constative’ function? Eckhart, like most preachers, *ends* his sermons with prayers rather than beginning with them. He seems to have displayed, on more than one occasion, a strikingly honest expectation of incomprehension (At the end of one sermon: “There are many people who do not understand this. That is not surprising to me.” Or, at the end of another: “If anyone has understood this sermon, I wish them well”).³⁹ Therefore, he seldom prays for understanding on behalf of his congregation.

³⁶ *ibid*, p110

³⁷ *Mystical Theology* 3:1033B, *Celestial Hierarchy* 2:141B

³⁸ “Denials” p111, *Psyché* 572

³⁹ taken from *Praedica verbum* in Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p184, and from *Nolite timere eos* in Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p180

Eckhart's brief prayers mostly involve asking God for divine help in becoming more like Him, or in understanding better what God 'is'.

Once again, the argument forks: with Derrida's Thomist reading of Eckhart, one could simply see the prayers at the end of the Dominican's sermons as examples of what Derrida calls "counter-signatures" - ways of confirming that the text just preached, however radically apophatic, is ultimately returned to the re-affirmed onto-theological God. This is, indeed, a relatively valid interpretation of Eckhart's prayers - however, it is not the only one. Prayers such as "May God...help us that we may be prepared to receive the best of gifts"⁴⁰, read in light of a *different* Eckhart, would act as a prelude towards the "emptying of the soul" discussed in the previous chapter. Such is Eckhart's prayer of preparation - de-essentializing, as opposed to re-affirming. Eckhart's prayer does not simply return his sermon to the all-too-familiar God of onto-theology, but rather asks that the *sêle* might become the kind of nothingness that the Godhead is. If Eckhart's prayers do indeed guide the soul, they guide it to a point where it no longer needs a guide. Which is precisely why Eckhart makes his famous prayer "I beg God to rid me of 'God' ". Eckhart's prayers do not "direct", they *de-limit*; they do not "determine", they *empty*. Far from invoking the very concept of God Eckhart deemed idolatrous, Eckhart's prayers initiate the breakthrough to the nameless, silent darkness of the Godhead.

4. The prohibition of discourse

Of all Derrida's objections to negative theology's kinship with deconstruction, his fourth and final one is perhaps the strongest. Partly because silence is so often extolled as the end of negative theology, and partly because of Eckhart's own frequent admonishments against 'chattering' (*klafen*) about God. Admonishments which, for Derrida, only serve to reinforce negative theology's essential *raison d'être*: "...to speak in order to command not to speak" (*Parler pour commander de ne pas parler*).⁴¹ Once we realise that nothing we can say in our finite and imperfect language can adequately represent God, that nothing in our inadequate vocabulary

⁴⁰ Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, p175, from the sermon *Omne datem optimum*

can convey the incommensurable hyperessentiality of God, then “we learn to read...and finally to be silent”.⁴²

Thus, Derrida sees negative theology as ultimately prohibiting discourse, as ultimately discouraging talk about God. Derrida sees this as the most convincing proof of both Eckhart and Dionysius’ ultimate commitment to metaphysics. A conviction that whatever we say will never be enough to convey the illusory “full presence” of God - and therefore, we should not speak at all.

That Eckhart extols silence as “the finest thing we can say about God” (*Das schoneste, dc der mensche gesprechen mag von gotte*)⁴³ cannot be denied. Neither can the frequency with which Eckhart commends the superiority of silence over discourse in sermons such as *Renovamini spiritu* and *Eratis enim aliquando*. What can be said, however, is that there are two different reasons in Eckhart why the individual should remain silent about God - and Derrida only really considers the first.

Eckhart’s first silence is, as Derrida rightfully claims, the silence of inadequacy. It is the silence of the finite in the presence of the infinite, the silence of the speechless in the face of the incommensurable. It is a silence born partly out of a sense of the fallibility of one’s discourse, and (more importantly) out of a sense of *respect*. Not surprisingly, Derrida sees in such respect an all-too-familiar homage towards an ineffable plenitude. It is a silence which belongs to many other similar calls for reticence in a variety of authors: Wittgenstein’s “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent”; Augustine’s divine contradictions, “to be passed over in silence” rather than “resolved verbally”⁴⁴; the silence of Kierkegaard’s Abraham, who “walks the narrow path of faith no-one can advise or understand”⁴⁵. In all such instances, it is our respect for the inexpressible ‘hyper-truth’ which forbids us to speak.

⁴¹ “Denials”, p121, *Psyché*, 583

⁴² *ibid*, p119

⁴³ Davies (ed), *Meister Eckhart*, p236 - from the sermon *Renovamini spiritu*, Sermon 83 in Quint 3:442

⁴⁴ *Christian Doctrine*, 1:6

⁴⁵ *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alistair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1995) p95

Eckhart's second silence, however, is not really taken up by Derrida. Having established Eckhart's God beyond God as just another infinitely deferred secret, Derrida can only ever see the Dominican's silence as self-censure. In doing so, Derrida misses the much more profound motivation behind the silence in Eckhart's thought: silence is not merely understood as a resignation to ineffability, but also as a prelude towards union with the silent, nameless nothingness of the Godhead.

We have already examined elsewhere how a central feature of the Godhead is silence: the Godhead is a discourse-free zone, a place where language cannot happen. Caputo writes that "while Eckhart spoke of a primal Word, he wanted to say that the truest language of all was absolutely silent".⁴⁶ Only through silence can one remain in the Godhead - indeed, silence is a precondition of one's entry into it, and one's remaining there:

When I was still in the ...source of the Godhead, no-one asked me where I was going...But as I flowed forth, all creatures uttered 'God'.⁴⁷

"When I flowed out, all creatures said 'God'": as soon as one leaves the Godhead, language can name, signification can occur, God can be called 'God' again. Once we are willing to understand Eckhart's Godhead not as a secret hidden away in a box, but rather as a silent darkness anterior to all our conceptions of God, then Eckhart's call for reticence is no longer *prohibitive*, but rather *imitative*. In typically Scholastic fashion, union can only come about through likeness. We have already seen how, if the soul wishes to be one with God, it must become "empty and free as God is empty and free in himself". In the same way, if the soul wishes to breakthrough into the silence of the Godhead, then it must become a kind of silence itself.

Within such a reading of Eckhart, the exhortation to silence in negative theology is no longer the faintly totalitarian muzzle Derrida paints it to be, but rather a means towards union with the divine. No longer the frowning prohibition of 'chatter' about God, but rather the possibility of finally dwelling in the silence of the Godhead. No longer the veto on all discourse about God, but rather an attempt to reach the same state of silence as God's ground, and thereby gain access to it.

⁴⁶ John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986) p224

⁴⁷ Davies (ed), *Meister Eckhart*, p234

The aim of this section, therefore, has been straightforward: to show how Derrida, in his dealings with negative theology, has been more interested in an Eckhart who defers than one who de-limits. Denys Turner criticises the various “contemporary readings” which have painted an Eckhart “satisfyingly redolent of Buddhism”.⁴⁸ Our attempt to present an alternative Eckhart to the Thomist version Derrida offers us - the ‘safe’ version Derrida clearly sees as representative of negative theology in general - has perhaps forced us to dwell on the more ‘unorthodox’ moments in Eckhart’s sermons. Hermeneutically speaking, Eckhart’s texts are no different to any of the other texts Derrida has examined: they are resistant to all totalization. Derrida’s intelligent and coherent critique of Eckhart remains, for all its worth, *undermined* by the passages Derrida does *not* cite, by the sermons he has not read.

Of course, whether such a reading of Eckhart can escape the description of metaphysical ‘hyperessentiality’ whilst at the same time remaining within a recognizably Christian framework - such a question lies outside the scope of this study. Certainly, Leibniz recognized very early on the potential dangers of negative theology, with its metaphors “almost inclining to Godlessness”. The word ‘almost’ is interesting, and does suggest why a number of recent Christian responses to postmodernity have expressed an interest in negative theology, even to the point of adopting a similar tone.⁴⁹ However, as we have said, the aim of this section has not been to consider how ‘Christian’ Eckhart’s sermons actually are, but rather to reinforce a thesis we have only alluded to up to now: that the version of Eckhart Derrida presents in “Denials”, an Eckhart who ultimately returns God to theology, will always be undercut by an ‘other’ Eckhart who de-limits the certainty of God, as opposed to deferring it. An Eckhart who refuses to understand God simply as ‘God’.

⁴⁸ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p266

⁴⁹ Leibniz is writing in a letter to Paccius, 28th January, 1695 - from L.Dutens’ *Leibnitii opera*, Geneva, 1768 6:56 and cited in “Post-Scriptum”, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p284. With regards to recent responses to postmodernity both Kevin Hart (*The Trespass of the Sign*) and Jean Luc Marion (*God Without Being*) attempt to show how allegedly anti-theological thinkers such as Derrida, Nietzsche and Heidegger can be re-considered in theological contexts. Most recently, Joseph Zornado has advocated a “Christian criticism”, modelled on a negative theology, which will deconstruct oppressive and violent “cataphatic value systems”. Such a Christian criticism will be “a way of seeing the infinite possibilities of the free play of signifiers” (*Christianity and Literature* 47:2 [1998] p162)

5.2 The Secret of The Pinter Effect: Some Closing Thoughts

Having examined the question of the secret in Eckhart's texts - of whether negative theology really is, in Derrida's words, a "secret society", we move on to Pinter and the question of whether Pinter's texts actually contain a secret at all. We have already suggested that there are two categories of Pinter plays: the first a category of undecidability, where plays such as *The Homecoming* and *The Caretaker* offer themselves up to a finite number of incomplete, contradictory readings - puzzles with conflicting solutions, as it were. The second a category of secrecy, where plays such as *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* rely on an absence of information to produce their uncertainty, and not the impossible choice between plausible yet mutually contradictory scenarios.

This final section concerns the second category of Pinter plays, and what kind of 'secrets' lie beneath the texts of *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. In doing so, we will examine the association of secrecy with death, and suggest that in Pinter, the significance of the secret lies invariably in the retention of malice.

In Borges' famous detective story of Talmudic hermeneutics "Death and the Compass", the protagonist tries to solve a series of murders which have been planned according to the letters of the tetragrammaton, the holy name of Jahweh. In trying to discover the identity of the murderer, the detective finds himself analogously drawn into solving the secret of the name of God. The hero, not surprisingly, finds death as soon as he locates the assassin. The idea that secrecy involves death (and that death involves secrecy) should come as no surprise, especially not to readers of detective fiction. One could examine the implications of this pairing *ad infinitum*: that Death is a secret denied to the living. Or the Elizabethan associations of 'secret' with 'virginity' and 'death' with 'consummation', opening up endless perspectives on secrecy, thanatology and sexuality. Or that the secret contains a forbidden - and fatal - knowledge, one which brings death to the overtly inquisitive. Looking upon the face of the Almighty, touching the Ark of the covenant, glimpsing the gods besport themselves naked - all of these have brought death at some time or another. What kind

of secrets are at work in *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*? Are they genuine secrets? And what does their disclosure ultimately bring?

Insiders and Outsiders.

The central secret of *The Dumb Waiter* is, ultimately, the planned death of one of its two protagonists. The sharing of the secret brings death to Gus. However, it is only one of a number of different kinds of secrets in both plays...pseudo-secrets, non-secrets, shared secrets, secrets which only the audience or the protagonist or the author knows, secrets which nobody really knows. Pinter's plays are full of secrets, some of them imaginary, some of them arbitrary (thrown in to 'spice' things up hermeneutically and prevent the story-line from lapsing into clarity), some of them real, fatally real.

The magic of the secret lies in its effect upon the mundane. As soon as we encounter an obvious secret - the advent of two strangers, the persistent reference to an unnamed organisation - then all discourse becomes potentially enigmatic. Even the dullest, most unpromising conversation about breakfast or weather immediately becomes cryptically-coded; even the most ordinary-sounding cadences suddenly acquire a mysterious ring. Everyday chatter, in the presence of the secret, becomes (in the words of Frank Kermode) "inexhaustibly occult".¹

In fact, Kermode's classic series of lectures on the secret - *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1978) - lends us two terms which shall prove useful in our study of the secret in Pinter: 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Although Kermode is actually concerned with the Gospel of Mark, and the question of Jesus' much-debated (in)consistency in sharing the secret of His divinity with some people and not with others, he is not reluctant to draw on other, more literary enigmas - Henry Green's pigeons, Kafka's parables, Joyce's Man in the Macintosh. Enigmas which, like Jesus, invoke 'insiders' - those on the inside who know the meaning of the parable or the purpose of the gesture, those who possess the much-desired *gnosis*, and 'outsiders' - those whose lot must inevitably be scepticism and speculation.

In plays such as *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*, there are three kinds of secret: open secrets, closed secrets and (for want of a better term) anti-

secrets. All three categories of secret can be found in the plays; all three categories involve someone or some group not knowing a certain reason, motive or meaning; all three categories, although straightforward and easily explainable, nevertheless play a central role in generating that blend of mystery and menace one might easily term 'the Pinter Effect'.

Open secrets are secrets which have been disclosed to the audience but not to certain members of the cast. In this sense, the audience and the knowing protagonists become 'insiders', as a third-party on- or off-stage are kept 'outside'. The most obvious open secret in *The Birthday Party* are the malevolent intentions of Goldberg and McCann, which Stanley is well aware of but about which Petey, Meg and Lulu are naively ignorant:

STANLEY[to Goldberg and McCann]: Let me - just make this clear. You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house. They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody's going to take advantage of them while I'm here. (45)

The secret of the visitor's malevolence creates in us a heightened sense of helplessness, especially when we witness Meg and Lulu's unsuspecting deference towards their homely deceit ("I've always like older men" says Lulu to Goldberg. "They can soothe you" 60). For Lulu and Petey, at least, the secret behind Goldberg's altruistic facade becomes known all too late - too late to prevent Stanley's abduction, or Lulu's unpleasant seduction/rape.

We are 'in' on the secret again in *The Dumb Waiter*, literally inside the same room as the two contract killers, who are waiting *à la Godot* in a bedsit-basement to spring their surprise on the 'outsider' who is about to arrive. The rehearsed instructions, chilling in their precision, underline our collusion with the assassins: "Stand behind the door...When the bloke comes in...Shut the door behind him...Without divulging your presence...He'll see me and come towards me...He won't see you...I take out my gun...He stops in his tracks...If he turns round...You're there".² As the audience listens, thoughts turn to the imminent arrival of the unsuspecting victim. Our observation of the assassins' discussions *involves* us in some

¹ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (London: Harvard University Press, 1979) p3

² p158-9 - all references to *The Dumb Waiter* are taken from *Plays: One*, Methuen 1976

way, renders us complicit as fellow initiates in the killers' dark *kerygma*: unwillingly, we participate in the secret, to the exclusion of the very person who will suffer from it.

If open secrets invite the audience into a certain circle of knowledge, closed secrets keep them firmly outside. Closed secrets occur in Pinter plays when characters allude to states of events which have been concealed from both fellow-characters *and* the audience. In other words, both the audience and the stage-characters become 'outsiders', outsiders to a knowledge held by an individual or a select few. The clearest example of such a closed secret occurs in *The Birthday Party*, where Goldberg and McCann make persistent references to an "organization", "mission" and "assignment", none of which the audience who listens have any idea about. The secret of the visitors' organization, their purpose in tracking Stanley down, the question of whether either party already knew one another before their meeting in the boarding house, even the reason why Goldberg takes such exception to being called "Simey"...all such information remains empirically out of bounds for the duration of the play.

The Dumb Waiter also has moments of privileged knowledge which exclude the audience. Much like *The Birthday Party*, there are constant references to a mysterious society, named individuals and previous "jobs", none of which the audience is familiar with. In Gus' comments about the "girl" they had once abducted and (presumably) tortured, Pinter draws on the familiar technique of supplying incomplete information about an incident in order to leave the greater horror to the audience/reader's imagination:

She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it?
What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. (146)

Unlike open secrets, where the audience shares the power status of the protagonist's knowledge and experiences an almost voyeuristic sensation of guilt and helplessness, closed secrets relegate the audience to a collection of paying eavesdroppers. Of course Esslin, in his regard for the 'realistic' status of Pinter's plays, refuses to see such third-party references as being enigmatic in any way. Given that "people don't explain each other's past lives and motivations, which are already well-known to them"³, Esslin sees the incomplete and elusive nature of Pinter dialogue as simply unmediated real-

³ Scott, *Pinter* (London: Macmillan Casebook Series, 1986) p172

life. There is nothing secretive or enigmatic, he argues, about the fragmentary and abbreviating character of overheard conversation, bereft of explanatory notes to assist the listener. This is how we talk in 'real life'.

Esslin's naturalist assumption that the function of good drama is essentially mimetic (i.e. the playwright's ability to reproduce a conversation in a pub as accurately as possible) completely fails to take into account the presentation of such conversations to an 'outside' third party. Esslin's perfectly valid point - that people who know one another do not re-iterate biographical asides whenever they talk about a friend or colleague - is wholly irrelevant to the dramatic experience of such conversations. Of course two people who work for the same "organization" are unlikely to explain its function or purpose to one another - a fact which does not reduce an audience's curiosity and bewilderment when they hear it constantly referred to on stage. The mystification of an audience cannot simply be dissolved by suggesting the dialogues they are eavesdropping on are 'how people really talk'. In his desire to de-mystify and re-emphasize the naturalism of Pinter, Esslin underestimates the hermeneutical complexity of the secret.

Of course, the irony of *The Dumb Waiter* is that what Gus believes to be an open secret (the two killers' arrangement to kill a third party) is actually a closed secret, closed to Gus (one partner has secretly been ordered to kill the other). Hence the moments in the play where Ben appears to be hiding an ulterior motive from his partner, a motive which the audience can only confirm retrospectively:

GUS: I've been meaning to ask you...why did you stop the car this morning, in the middle of the road?

BEN: (*lowering the paper*) I thought you were asleep.

GUS: I was, but I woke up when you stopped. You did stop, didn't you?

Pause.

In the middle of the road...I thought perhaps you wanted to kip, but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something. (135)

Why *did* Ben stop the car? Ben does not appear eager to say - his evasive tone, weak excuse ("We were too early") and abrupt desire to terminate the topic ("Who took the call, me or you?") all arouse suspicion. Suddenly, Ben becomes the keeper of a secret which neither Gus nor the audience are 'in' on: the secret of Gus' imminent death. A secret kept from Gus till the very end of the play. Precisely why Ben stopped the car in the middle of the road actually matters very little - Gus' querying of an irregularity is

enough to call Ben's signs into question. To stop a car suddenly for no reason is inexplicable - and in Pinter, as we have learnt, the inexplicable is seldom innocent.

Pinter's plays work towards ignorance, not knowledge. Whereas open secrets encourage a sense of control in the audience by letting them know everything that is happening on stage, closed secrets diminish this sense of security as they begin to sever, one by one, the audience's channels of epistemological access to the play. In the everyday thriller or detective story, audience knowledge is gradually augmented as one secret after another is divulged. In Pinter, the reverse occurs: the number of things the audience does not know actually increases as the play progresses. At the start of *The Birthday Party*, the audience is asking: who are the two visitors who are going to come? and why is Stanley so frightened of them? By the end of the play, the questions have proliferated: did the visitors know Stanley beforehand? Who were they working for? What did they do to Stanley upstairs? Where have they taken him? Why are they abducting him? Who is Monty?

It is important to stress how Pinter plays such as *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* diminish audience knowledge, whereas plays such as *The Homecoming* and *The Caretaker* de-stabilize it. The uncertainty of the first category of plays is produced by withdrawing central elements of information - whereas the uncertainty of *The Homecoming* and *The Caretaker* is produced by rendering the audience familiar with one set of certainties (Ruth the homely wife, Max the vicious father, Mick the brotherly thug) and then de-stabilizing them with another (Ruth the prostitute, Max the loving grandpa, Mick the best mate and guardian). This distinction between the infinitely speculative unknown and the infinitely undecidable known constitutes the difference between the two kinds of uncertainty in Pinter's plays.

Although closed secrets diminish audience knowledge and instil a moderate sense of uncertainty in the observer, they never radically challenge the hermeneutical structure of the play. That is, we realise *we* do not know the significance of this action or that name, but we are 'comforted' by the fact that somebody *does* know, even if they are unwilling to disclose such knowledge to the rest of us. The existence of the information which would de-mystify the gesture or remark and render it comprehensible is never called into question.

The third category of secrets in Pinter, however, does precisely this. Anti-secrets are secrets where *everyone* is an outsider, perhaps even the author. They

appear gratuitously, distinguish themselves from surrounding events by their very incongruity, proffer an inscrutable, undeniable significance and simultaneously refuse to yield that significance to anyone - neither the protagonist, the audience nor even a third party. Halfway through *The Dumb Waiter*, as Ben and Gus discuss football results, a small brown envelope is pushed underneath the door. Gus opens it, to find inside twelve matches. "That's funny, isn't it?" says Gus. Who sent the matches - and why? Simply to "light the kettle"? Could it be a bizarre pun on the word "matches" by the author, given that Gus and Ben were discussing football at that precise moment? And why *twelve* matches - the twelfth month? The twelfth hour? The number of players in a football team? One number short of a treacherous disciple?

Unlike the secret of Aston's smile (either treacherous malice or brotherly love), anti-secrets retain an infinite number of hermeneutical possibilities, inexhaustible by the very fact of their incongruity. Who works the dumb waiter? What is its purpose in the play? Is it a symbol, a joke, a dig at future critics? What exactly *is* whispered to Ben through the tube? Do they really tell him to kill Gus?⁴

Pinter has long berated critics for the futility of such cabalistically-inspired questions - particularly when they have been directed at him. The possibility that such enigmas mean nothing and therefore - by default - *anything*, invests Pinter's texts with an uncertainty which goes radically beyond even the theocentric echoes of Goldberg's mysterious "organization". Anti-secrets disconcert precisely because we realise that no-one is in control - as the cliché says, the secret is that there is no secret -and yet the effect remains. The illusion of secrecy is still strong enough to chill us.

The conviction that a hidden, deeper, radically *other* significance must necessarily lie behind the Buddha statue in *The Caretaker*, the workings of the dumb waiter, the envelope of matches under the door or even that now-famous, hastily scribbled remark in Nietzsche's final notebook ("I have forgotten my umbrella") is perhaps fading with us. Which is not to say that the meaning is no longer recoverable, but rather that there never was an Ur-meaning to recover. "Meaning begins in the

⁴ On the 'precise meaning' of the dumb waiter itself, critical commentaries offer little help. Trussler sees a pun on Gus, the dumb-waiter (*The Plays of Harold Pinter*, 52); Morrison prefers "a hilarious image of unquestioning obedience to authority" (*Canter and Chronicles*, 146); Dukore registers the image of "a man emptying all he has to appease an unseen master" (*Harold Pinter*, 39) and Esslin, much in the same vein, sees behind the dumb waiter "a supernatural power bombarding [Ben and Gus] with impossible demands" (*The Peopled Wound*, 71). Hinchliffe, perhaps wisest of all, simply notes "an opening into the unknown" (*Harold Pinter*, 64) and moves quickly on.

words, in action, continues in your head and ends nowhere. There is no end to meaning.” (Pinter, in a letter to Peter Wood).⁵ Noises, gestures, actions happens on a stage and immediately our attentions are busy swarming over them, attributing meanings and designs, turning the slightest discrepancies into secrets. Pinter’s plays, with their conundrums and contradictions, their puzzles and strange silences, assist this deception: they make us feel a silence is when *something* remains unsaid. They maintain the illusion of secrecy.

“God is a word”, says Eckhart, “an unspoken word”.⁶ If God really is a secret in Eckhart (a reading we have called into question in the previous section), then He is a secret of Love, not of malice. To participate in such a secret means, in Eckhart, to engender the unspoken Word in the ground of the soul and breakthrough into the loving abyss of the Godhead. In this sense, sharing a secret in Eckhart does bring death to the knower - a “destruction of the person”, a death to all selfhood⁷ - just as Ben’s disclosure of the secret brings death to Gus.

Of course, the secrets of terror in *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* are far from illusory. The concealment of a desire to kill and do harm is the central secret and driving force of both plays. The possibility of unconditional, unmotivated malice, as we insisted in Section 4.2.2., is what generates the ‘Pinter Effect’ - a possibility which imbues even the most innocuous remarks with darker implications. However, out of the three categories of secret we have examined, Pinter’s anti-secrets seem to generate an effect all of their own - a sense of mystery and bewilderment not necessarily dependent upon a potentially menacing presence, but which rather seems to spring from a gratuitous incongruity. We see the Buddha statue on the mantelpiece or the envelope pushed under the door, we perceive the operation of the dumb waiter and its centrality in the play, we *feel* there is an importance attached to them and await a justifiable explanation - which never comes. Perhaps there lies the remnants of something ultimately theological in such expectations - perhaps, to hear a silence and feel there is ‘something’ not being said, is the unconscious reflex of a much older yearning. Will there come a time when we are no longer be surprised by the

⁵ Scott, Macmillan Casebook, p80

⁶ Davies (ed), *Meister Eckhart*, p128

⁷ Davies (ed), *Meister Eckhart*, p46

incongruous, nor expect every remark to have an ascribable meaning? For now, at least, Pinter's plays seem to be in little danger of such audiences. We are still on the 'outside'.

Conclusion.

Throughout this thesis, we have been concerned with three writers and their various attempts to radically re-locate uncertainty in the heart of the familiar. What follows constitutes a few words on the conclusions to be drawn from this work, and more importantly the wider implications such conclusions suggest for our understanding of negative theology, deconstruction and the drama of the Absurd.

1) Eckhart's emphasis on the radically unspeakable nature of God and language's utter inadequacy to convey this deconstructs a certain Scholastic confidence, just as Derrida's emphasis on the unmasterability of the text undermines the Structuralist / phenomenological dream of scientific rigour. In both cases, the writers refuse to see the ineffability/instability of their subjects as a 'problem', but rather celebrate the freedom of such uncertainty as something to be desired.

In Pinter, however, the uncertainty of language never manifests neutrally, but always seems to find itself in a militaristic context - employed as a strategy to puzzle, disarm and deceive one's opponents. Thus the very uncertainty of meaning extolled by Eckhart and Derrida actually encourages, in Pinter, a never-ending power struggle whose battleground is language and whose stakes are the appropriation of one's identity and freedom by another.

2) Both Eckhart and Derrida proffer analogous versions of a 'thought of non-destination', where the topography of 'destination' complies with the etymology of 'motivation'. Both writers' pathless ways see the idea of a destination as obstructive / illusory; both writers exhort a mode of behaviour which is spontaneous and 'whyless', one which refuses to chain one's actions to a reifying centre, a spiritually-deadening vocabulary of motivations and goal-orientated thinking. Both writers prefer to wander rather than to march, and encounter thereby analogous difficulties in attempting to theorise their positions on an unknowable God of love and an 'ethical' deconstruction.

In Pinter, however, wandering and whylessness acquire a more negative meaning. To stray without origins or destination, far from constituting any sense of freedom or spiritual renewal, merely results in vulnerability and terror. The thoughtless spontaneity of the good man's actions, in Mick, form part of a darker strategy to inflict unpredictable violence upon one's victim. Errancy and aimlessness facilitate anguish and humiliation in *The Caretaker*, and not a "seminal adventure" or a "breakthrough to the Godhead".

3) With regards to the Other, both Eckhart and Derrida see the language of certainty - that is, the mimetic language of predication and representation - as essentially *violent*. Although in his earlier works Derrida calls into question the possibility of ever non-violently welcoming the Other, both writers do ultimately extol the uncertainty of God/the Other as something which should be preserved, not dispelled. Both Eckhart and Derrida write of an analogous "openness" towards God/the Other, an openness which would acknowledge the radical incommensurability of God /the Other, whilst still allowing some degree of non-violent reception.

In *The Birthday Party*, this positive version of the uncertainty of the Other quickly becomes negative. The ineffability and unfathomable motivations of Goldberg's "organisation" exerts its inscrutable will to crush and assimilate the individual into its nameless whole. The spiritually-directed vocabularies of negative theology and Neoplatonism, intended to move the soul nearer to God through the abandonment of language, finds a darker evolution in Pinter: they conceal and make enigmatic a very real desire to murder, humiliate and control.

4) The consistent objection that Derrida has raised against both Eckhart and Dionysius' negative theologies - that, for all their earnest deconstructing, their ultimate purpose is to defer the 'secret' of the onto-theological God - is acknowledged to be valid, but not *exclusively* so. There is another Eckhart (and, no doubt, another Dionysius¹) to be drawn from sermons which Derrida has not

¹ The debate concerning the extent of God's ineffability in Dionysius still goes on - see the exchange between Aimee Light and John N.Jones in *Harvard Theological Review* 91:2 (1998) pp205-9. Jones is insistent that Dionysian thought is "*not* self-negating" - there are "positive" things to be said about God (209). Aimee Light, however, contends Jones' claim that Dionysius "does not deny

considered, from passages Derrida has chosen not to quote. An Eckhart whose God is a radically divine nothingness, and not simply a secret tucked away outside language, hidden beneath a veil or kept behind a screen. A God beyond 'truth' and 'being', because He is always already prior to such concepts. In trying to paint this radical 'God'-less Eckhart as the Thomist corrector of affirmative theologies, the purveyor of a Truth and the keeper of a secret, Derrida unwittingly replicates the same kind of accusations which have been levelled at his own work.

The question of the secret in the early Pinter, once again, acquires a darker hue. The key secrets in plays such as *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* are not secrets of love, but rather designs of malice - the privileged knowledge of another's death or impending torture. As we have seen, the malice of such uncertainty is infectious: it renders everything, even the most peripheral and mundane occurrences, sinister and potentially threatening. However, there are also secrets in Pinter's plays which can have no possible meaning - or, by default, *all* possible meanings. The unexpectedness and incongruity of their arrival makes them impenetrably enigmatic - even if, in the end, there is no enigma to penetrate.

"To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words 'proximity', 'immediacy', 'presence'" wrote Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, "is my final intention in this book."² To 'make enigmatic' means, literally, to *darken* (from the Greek *ainigma*). To re-introduce a darkness into what was previously illuminated; to obscure something which was felt to be clear. At least one implication of the above points is that, in their own unique way, all three writers re-introduce the darkness of the enigmatic into safely-held assumptions about meaning, language and God. All three writers react against the certain and familiar, resisting the desire to clarify and explain. At a time when scholars were more confident than ever in their capacity to speak about God and His attributes, or language and its sign-systems, when the Chekhovian dream of reproducing people on the stage 'exactly as they are' was beginning to change British drama, all three writers chose to restore a certain

indiscriminately the use of language for its transcendent God, but only that language implies existence." On the contrary, argues Light, Dionysius "uses certain language to say what God is not, then abandons even this language as saying too much." (206).

darkness into the midst of things, trying to “make enigmatic” certainties which were being taken for granted.

In his work *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, Hugo Rahner describes how the flourishing enlightenment of Greek thought and the arts in the first four centuries after Christ provoked, in turn, the desire for a “mystery atmosphere” once more:

...the Apollonian brilliance of Greek sculpture...the acids of Attic comedy, and later the rationalism of the Stoa, dissolved the traditional belief in gods and goddesses... [and] led the Greek increasingly to seek refuge in the eerie realm of the cults.³

The enlightenment certainties in Greek thought aroused in many a nostalgia for the ancient mystery cults, a yearning for what Rahner calls the “pre-Hellenic darkness” of earlier times: “What man now seeks is the bizarre...as against the Olympian calm of classical times”.⁴ The desires in all three writers to re-affirm the mystery of God, the enigma of presence and the strangeness of the everyday are, I suggest, distant cousins of this desire for a “pre-Hellenic darkness”. Which is not to completely sever Eckhart from his Scholastic origins, nor to re-write Derrida and Pinter as mystical keepers of a secret *gnosis*, but simply to underline how all three writers see clarity and the language of certainty as banal and illusory - if not with quite the same consequences.

It is no coincidence that both Eckhart and Derrida use the word “abyss” (*abgrunt* / *abîme*) to describe their respective notions of the Godhead and *différance*. Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology* of “the abyss through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed”⁵, whilst Eckhart refers often to the “eternal abyss of divine being”.⁶ As we saw in Section 2.1.2, both versions of the abyss - the Derridean and the divine - are unnameable, constitute a ‘nothingness’ and yet remain generative in an essentially positive way. The abyss of the Godhead is the

² *Of Grammatology*, p70

³ Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, trans. Brian Battershaw (London: Burns and Oates, 1963) p17

⁴ *ibid*, p17 - Rahner is actually quoting Karl Latte, “Religiose Strömungen in der Frühzeit des Hellenismus” *Die Antike* I (1925) p153

⁵ *Of Grammatology*, p14

⁶ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, p205

nameless source of all names, the silence from which all language springs, whilst the abyss of *différance* is “the play which makes possible nominal effects”⁷, an *abîme* of “irreducible and generative multiplicity”.⁸ Both Eckhart and Derrida encourage us, for very different reasons, to embrace the abyss, to remain open to its utter uncertainty, to desist from trying to name it or predict what it will give us.

If our inclusion of Pinter in this thesis has had any function at all, it has been as a sobering corrective to this joyful affirmation of the uncertain. Pinter shows us uncertainty’s darker edge. He shows us how, at times, the ambiguity of language can be distinctly *undesirable*. The fact that the meaning of any grammatical sentence may oscillate indeterminately between a finite number of alternative possibilities is a purely semantic observation - in Pinter it becomes of strategic value. Pinter’s plays remind us that being ignorant of one’s destination is not always a good thing - that ‘joyful wandering’ can mean ending up in a place where we do not want to be. Pinter prevents us from getting too ‘joyful’ about the uncertainty of the Other by showing how the Other might use that uncertainty to do us harm. Although there are enough ‘certainty-seekers’ in Pinter’s plays (Ted, Max, Davies) to show the wrongheadedness of chaining ourselves to the unstable signs around us, there are also enough ‘uncertainty-exploiters’ in his plays (Lenny, Mick, Goldberg) to show what might happen to us if we abandon the certainties we already have. To “absolutely welcome” the uncertainty of the Other may not *always* be the best course of action, particularly if the Other is a Goldberg or a McCann.

⁷ *Margins of Philosophy*, p26

⁸ *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone, 1987) p45

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